

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

MAY
18

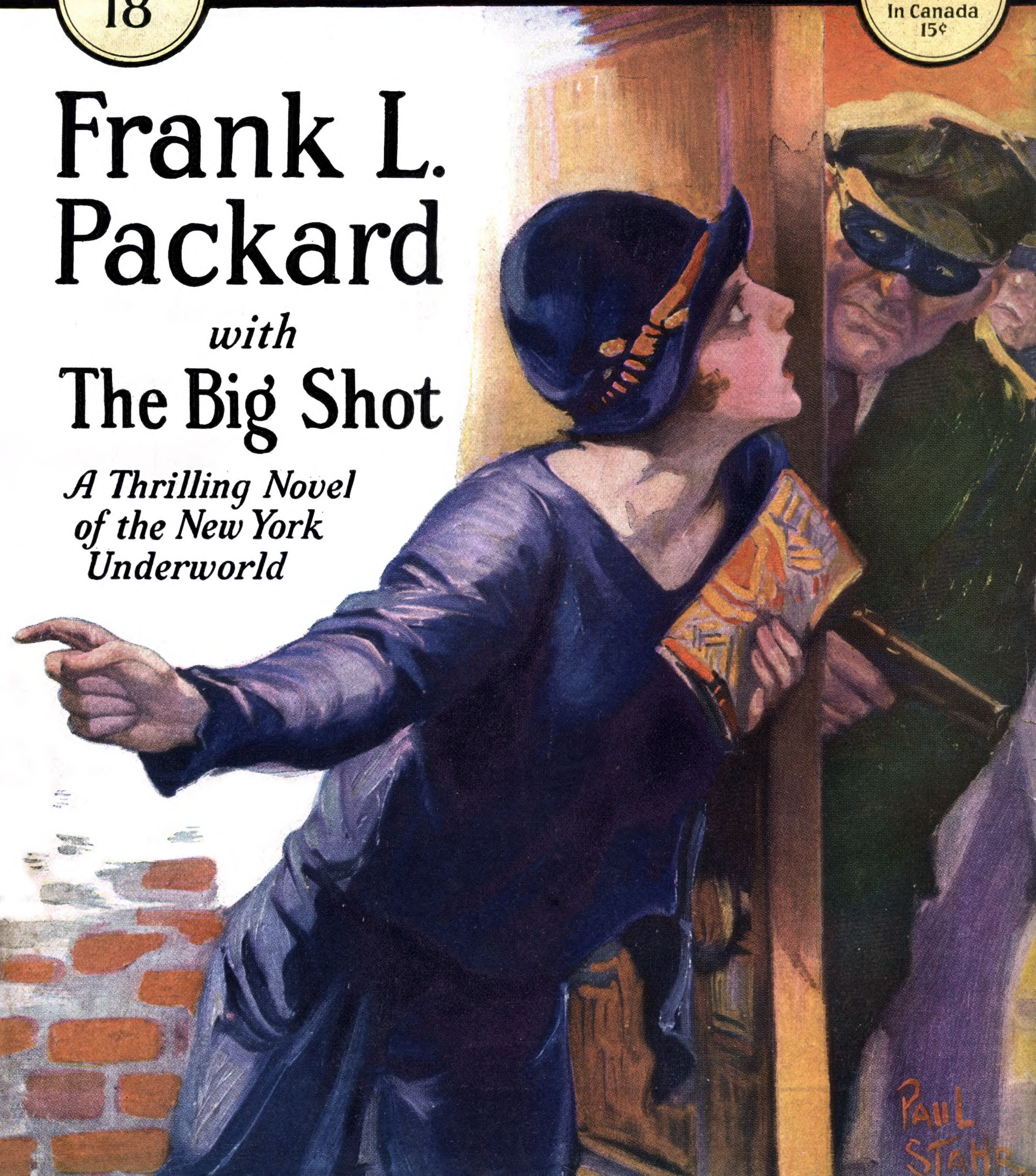
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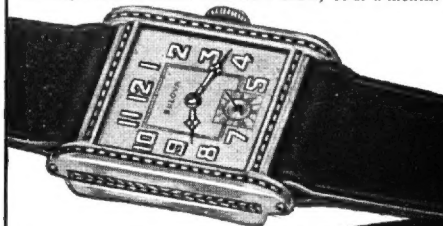


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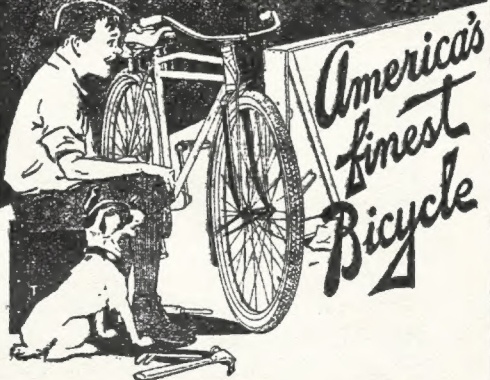
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ARGOSY



ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 203

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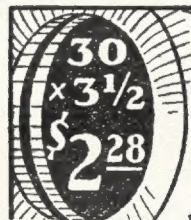
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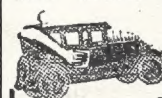
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ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 203

SATURDAY, MAY 18, 1929

NUMBER 5



*The junk shop camouflaged far more
than a mere hangout for a few
gangsters*

The Big Shot

*Enid Howard sought local color on New York's East Side—and found herself
engulfed in a seething maelstrom of underworld passions*

By **FRANK L. PACKARD**

Author of "The Miracle Man," "The Locked Book," etc.

CHAPTER I.

"WANTED!"

IT called itself the Gondola Restaurant. Heaven knew why! There were no gondolas within, and certainly there were no gondolas outside on Third Avenue. Joe Caprillo, its proprietor, however, was a Venetian.

Its tablecloths were not overclean, but the food was good and moderately priced, and the little semi-private stalls

along the walls were always popular. Also, other than food might be obtained in the guise of innocent beverages—a fact not to be ignored in appraising the restaurant's popularity!

It did a thriving business. It smiled alike on the just and on the unjust; and since its *clientèle* was admittedly composed of more than a mere sprinkling of the latter, the Gondola had an air about it—as though something were always just going to happen. And why

shouldn't something happen? Not so very long ago Soapy Connor had been shot to death there, and Jackie the Wop was even now waiting for the chair in the Big House for the killing.

The Gondola was always interesting to Enid Howard. She had been here perhaps a dozen times for late supper, and generally alone, as to-night. Of late, however, there had been exceptions to that—relatively speaking, quite a few of them. There was Phil Martin, for instance.

Joe Caprillo, with whom she had become quite friendly, had told her that Signor Martin had been almost a constant visitor of late at the hour when, if she came at all, she patronized the Gondola. Joe Caprillo, the greasy little proprietor, had been obsequious and obvious, intending to please; she wondered, puckering her brow, just how much she was responsible for Mr. Martin's actions in this respect.

She had finished her supper; only her coffee remained. She glanced at her wrist watch. Half past eleven. Quite beyond the usual hour. She was conscious of a little sense of disappointment. He was hardly likely to come this evening at any rate.

From the stall in which she sat she could see the main entrance. Two men came in; a little hurriedly, a little excitedly, it seemed to her. She caught snatches of their conversation, as they passed her, making for a table or stall farther in the rear. It was something about a police raid on a spaghetti joint a few blocks away—on Sixty-Ninth Street, she thought they said. She watched them until they took seats. Quite probably a pair who had eluded the net and ducked in here for cover!

Her eyes roved around the room. The center tables were fairly well filled, as were the stalls on the opposite side of the room. There was a lot of talking going on, but the voices were low, like the lights. Except to their immediate companions, no one paid any attention to any one else.

There were decent people here, of course—if one could pick them out; but that well-dressed, middle-aged man, who was talking so earnestly to the young man in the stall directly across from her, was, so Phil Martin had told her, an ex-convict who had already three convictions for felony against him, and would, if convicted of a fourth, get life imprisonment under the Baumes Law. What was he talking about now? Would one or both of them be in the police line-up at headquarters to-morrow morning; or would the papers carry the story of some fresh crime whose perpetrators were unknown—or were they merely arguing about the practicability of the blindfold test to determine one brand of cigarettes from another?

HER mind reverted to Phil Martin. Phil Martin had pointed out more than one unsavory character of innocent appearance in the Gondola. He not only had their police records at his finger tips, but was personally acquainted with many of them as well. She had asked him how he knew all these people, and his reply had been at least plausible. He had said that he was a newspaper man.

She did not know whether he was or not; but she was quite prepared to admit to herself that she liked him well enough in a friendly way to hope he was telling the truth. Perhaps he was. Probably he was. But she had learned enough in her three months' stay in New York to know that appearances in Gangland, even to the extent of expensive and butler-equipped apartments on Park Avenue, might very easily be misleading and deceptive.

She could not forget that, before he had first spoken to her, she had seen Phil Martin in here on several occasions in close communion with a miserable, shifty-eyed and repulsive-looking creature who needed no pointing out as a member in exceedingly good standing of the criminal class! They

had appeared to be very chummy. Very much so!

She began suddenly to toy with her coffee cup. That was why, wasn't it, in spite of a feeling of mutual good-fellowship which had sprung up between them, she had kept him at a distance? She wasn't quite sure of him. He had not been any too communicative—but neither had she, for that matter. Perhaps it was her own fault that she did not know more about him. She had not invited confidences. She had enjoyed, very thoroughly enjoyed, sharing a table with him; but the acquaintanceship was still a very recent one.

She smiled now a little whimsically to herself. Her thoughts were dwelling rather persistently on Phil Martin, weren't they? Well, why not? It was a somewhat strange and unusual—what should she call it, friendship?—that existed between them.

It was only a week ago that they had first spoken to each other. The Gondola had been crowded that night; but, having arrived early, she had secured her usual stall. Later on, when Phil Martin had come in alone, she was the only one in the restaurant who was occupying a table to herself. He had come over to her after a moment's hesitation, and asked if he might share her table.

"If you say no," he had said smilingly, "I shall have to go away hungry." He himself, his appearance and his manner, she rather liked; but, remembering the questionable companion with whom she had seen him so often, she was not sure that she had been whole-heartedly pleased with his request. She had, however, invited him to sit down.

Naturally, they had not sat there for the better part of an hour like a pair of mutes! He had introduced himself. He was a newspaper man, he said. The *Herald-Star*. And she? She was writing a book. Oh, a writer! A community of interest! What kind of a

book? A novel of the East Side. Who was going to publish it? She had not said; how could she? Well, her name? Oh, yes—that! She had told him her name.

After that, they had chatted pleasantly. He talked well. He had told her stories of East Side life, and had pointed out several notorious characters who had been in the Gondola that night. He had asked, a little diffidently, to see her home. She had refused.

Since then, in the week that followed, though never by appointment, they had had late supper together here in the Gondola on three occasions. She had liked him better each time. He knew so much about the East Side. He was a fund of information. His manner and his attitude toward her had been impeccable—only that unsavory boon companion of his, still glimpsed in the offing, disturbed her.

He had never referred to the man. To invite confidence was to give in return, so she had asked no questions. She still kept the barriers up between them; she still refused to permit him to accompany her home. He had been, especially last night, almost offended because she would not let him pay her check. But that was not in the bargain either. Yes, certainly, to say the least of it, their relations toward each other were a trifle bizarre!

SHE had lifted her shoulders in an expressive little shrug. Well, anyway, it was time to go. She called her waiter, and paid her bill—and then, almost on the point of rising, she saw the door open, and saw the object of her thoughts making his way directly toward her.

It was utterly absurd, but she was nevertheless conscious of a suddenly heightened color in her cheeks. For an instant, she was panicky lest he should notice it, but by the time he had reached the table she had taken refuge behind that impregnable feminine for-

tress, a compact, and her composure had returned.

"My luck's holding to-day, all right, Miss Howard," was his cheery greeting. "I was afraid I was too late and that you would have gone—even if you had been here at all."

"I was just going," she smiled.

"Well, then, please don't—not for a few minutes anyhow," he pleaded. "I'll just"—he beckoned to a waiter—"order a bite, and then I'll tell you something worth while. I'm afraid I can't let you use it in your book, but I think you'll find enough color in it to interest you. You'll stay, won't you?"

"This is pure bribery!" said Enid Howard sternly—but there was laughter in her brown eyes.

"Sure it is!" he admitted frankly.

"Then I'll stay, for a little while," she agreed.

She studied him as he glanced over the menu. He was not handsome—she had decided that long ago; but he was undeniably good-looking in a wholesome, rugged way. Those steady gray eyes might become very steely, and that square chin be very definitely set in moments of stress or anger, but she had never seen him in such a mood. He could not be more than twenty-four, and very little less than six feet in height. She liked the way he dressed. That dark-gray suit set off his broad shoulders and went well with his sun-burned complexion and fair hair.

He looked up from the menu.

"I know you have already had supper, but isn't there something I could order for you?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Thank you, no," she answered. "I couldn't possibly eat anything more."

"Sure?"—a little entreatingly.

"Quite sure."

Phil Martin gave his order to the waiter, and dismissed the man.

"Well?" she prompted, as her companion remained for a moment silent. "Shall we proceed to the payment of that bribe? I warn you that it must

be wholly adequate, for it is already quite a little past my usual hour."

"After Lugo comes back. I'd rather not take the chance of even a stray word being overheard," he said seriously.

"That sounds momentous!"

"It is!" he said. "It's front page stuff. I told you my luck was in. But meanwhile there's something else I want to say. I tried to screw up courage to say it last night, but I couldn't quite make the grade. I don't want you to think I'm butting in. It's about you."

She looked at him questioningly, but without comment. He seemed suddenly ill at ease, fumbling unnecessarily with his cigarette case as he took it from his pocket and selected a cigarette.

"I know you don't smoke," he said; "but I know you don't mind if I do." He hesitated for an instant. "It's none of my business, of course, and I haven't the slightest right to say it, except that—well, I just feel I ought to as a—a friend, if you will let me call myself that. I know a lot more about conditions around here in this locality than you do. I'm just going to push all bunk and flattery to one side and say that you're too dashed pretty and attractive a young woman to come unaccompanied to joints like this. I know what you're after—atmosphere, and first-hand information, and all that sort of thing—but it's risky and dangerous."

HE was too obviously sincere to be misunderstood. Even that determined jaw looked just a little more determined in his earnestness. She answered him in like measure.

"I have never been molested," she said quietly, "and I think that a girl who minds her own business has very little to fear. Besides, I feel quite sure that I can take care of myself. I've been more or less brought up that way, you see. We were very much an out-of-doors family. As I told you the

other night, I am a Canadian, and I've camped and hunted through our Rockies and up north of the Peace River district for months at a time with my father. My brother was reported 'missing' in the war, and as soon as I was old enough, I took, or tried to take, his place with dad. The mountains and plains and forests give one a different outlook on these things, put one more on one's own, don't you think?

"I am perfectly certain, for instance, that I am a very much better shot than any of the undesirables who are sitting around us with guns, or 'rods' as I believe they call them, parked in holsters at their waists or under their left armpits; and"—she burst into a little laugh—"I've even got a rod myself."

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, and leaned forward toward her, his eyes straying from hers to the small black hand bag that lay on the table edge beside her. "You don't mean to say that you've got one here?"

"Perhaps," she smiled.

"Wow! Don't you know there's a five years' sentence for that?"

"Only in connection with the commission of a felony," she corrected him coolly; "otherwise it is simply a misdemeanor—if one hasn't got a permit."

"But you haven't got a permit?"

"No; of course not." She leaned back in her chair watching him in secret amusement. He was frowning in a puzzled and bewildered way. "Yes?" she invited.

"I am going to add another adjective to what I said a moment ago," he blurted out. "You are a very extraordinary young woman. But, in spite of that, I am coming back to my original point. I think this sort of thing is dangerous; and above all, I do not think it is safe for you to walk from here alone and at night to the neighborhood where you live."

She stiffened suddenly in her chair.

"How do you know where I live?" she demanded sharply.

He was crunching the end of his cigarette in the ash tray.

"I followed you," he confessed calmly.

"Oh!" she reached angrily for her gloves and hand bag. "Somehow I did not think that *you* would do that!"

"I have followed you every night," he said in a low voice, "either by myself, or together with that unprepossessing chap you must have seen me with." He was still crunching at his cigarette and he did not look up. "Surely you understand. Surely you must know why. It couldn't have been to pry upon you—could it?"

She felt the color flood her face. She did not like the idea of being followed by any one for any reason, but she had been a little too hasty in her judgment. She owed him amends. He had been genuinely concerned about her. She laid her gloves back on the table beside the hand bag.

"I am sorry I said that," she said frankly. "I—I am quite sure you were prompted only by kindness; but you must never do such a thing again, for I cannot agree with you that there is even the slightest cause for alarm."

He looked up at her now with a disarming grin.

"Well, there is an alternative," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"No." Her voice was serious in spite of her responsive smile. "I do not wish to be accompanied, either—at present, anyhow. My—I'll call her my housekeeper—is away. The neighbors know that. I have myself to think of."

"But," he protested, "I—"

"There are no 'buts,'" she interrupted with quiet emphasis. "Either you must agree on both counts, or else I shall have to find some other place for supper hereafter."

"That's worse than bribery!" he declared reproachfully. "That's holding a pistol to a fellow's head!"

"Well, it's loaded," she retorted, "and business is meant! Here is Lugo with your supper. Shall I stay or—"

"I agree," he said hastily. "What else can I do? But, just the same, I do not like it. I'm not so sure"—ruefully—"that my luck is holding out!"

THE waiter placed Phil Martin's order on the table, and departed.

"Aren't you?" she inquired laughingly. "Well, anyhow, I'm all curiosity about the luck you have had. That's what you were going to tell me about, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "And I'll tell you now—between mouthfuls, if you'll promise not to look at that wrist watch again for the next ten minutes. Listen! Do you know what a Big Shot is?"

She nodded her head.

"I think I do," she said. "It's what the gangsters, or any mob for that matter, call their leader, isn't it?"

"Right! You're making famous progress. You'll be able to talk the whole lingo in its revised edition before long. It was a rod a minute ago. Where do you get it?"

"Quite a lot of it from you. You've been very helpful!" she answered naively. "Please go on."

"Delighted to have been of any assistance!" he laughed; and then, suddenly serious again: "All right! There are any number of little fellows who get that name. There may be only three or four of them working together, but one of them is always the Big Shot. There isn't a crook who doesn't yearn for the title and distinction. It elevates him to the peerage of the underworld; and the bigger and more important the gang, of course, the more purple and ermine he wears.

"So the name is common enough; but for quite a long time now it has been pretty well recognized by the police that there's just *one* Big Shot in New York. But they've never spotted him, never identified him. From here and there hints and rumors have

dribbled in, and there has been more or less intangible evidence that the same man is the guiding spirit of a number of different gangs that work their own lines without any apparent connection with one another. You know what I mean. He seems to have a finger in every pie. One pie isn't big enough for him. He seems to be out after all the plums—making and shoving the 'queer'; bootlegging on a large scale; a crap circuit; and a general following of stick-up men and steerers. Some bird, eh? I told you it was front page stuff."

Enid Howard knitted her brow into little furrows, as Phil Martin re-attacked his plate.

"But I don't see how such a man could evade identification, let alone capture," she commented. "Surely, if what you say of him is true, he ought to be easy enough to find."

Phil Martin laughed a little grimly.

"Yes, you'd think so, wouldn't you? But the fact remains that that's the way it's been, and even to-night, though it looks like the beginning of the end for him, he's still a good deal of a mystery just the same."

"I don't know what you mean by that," she said in a puzzled way. "Have the police finally got him?"

"No!" he said. "That's where my luck is in. I think I've got a lead that's sure fire!"

"You?" She leaned across the table. "But what have you got to do with it?"

"Everything!" he answered, his eyes dancing excitedly over the rim of his coffee cup. "It will be the biggest scoop any New York newspaper has ever had. I'll even have his photograph before morning! We'll have the goods on him in the next few days, all right—and have a special ready on the press when we tip off the police."

"And then?" she asked.

"Then?" he repeated in amazement.

"Why, good heavens, don't you see? The *Herald-Star* gets the credit, and the Big Shot gets life—if he's lucky enough to escape the chair."

"Oh!" she said, a little faintly. "And you? What do you get out of it?"

"I? It's my job. If I'm fortunate enough to pull it off, I've done a big thing for my paper; and a big thing for society in putting the most dangerous criminal in New York out of the way. You get that, don't you?"

SHE made no direct answer.

"I don't see how you could have succeeded where the police seem to have failed so completely," she observed.

"More good luck than anything else," he said frankly. "I don't want you to think I'm posing as any super-sleuth hound. It's due to the fact that about a year ago I was able to help that chap you've seen with me out of a little jam with the police. He's got a bit of a record, of course, and several aliases, but he's generally known as Shive Frank. I guess I'll have to help you there a little. A shive is a knife. His past history shows a predilection for that weapon rather than a rod—hence his moniker."

Enid Howard cupped her chin in her hand thoughtfully.

"I've wondered a good deal about him, and what you two could have in common," she admitted. "He sounds even worse than he looks!"

Phil Martin shrugged his shoulders.

"He is," he said, "but he's very valuable—to me. About ten days ago I ran into him quite by accident in a spaghetti house. I hadn't seen him since the time I'd been able to pull that friendly little office for him nearly a year back. I asked him where he'd been, and he said that he got into some trouble with his gang and had to duck, but that the mob had since broken up and that most of them were in Sing Sing. So he was back. As a matter of

fact, I happen to know that he squealed on them to save his own hide."

"Do they know whom they have to thank?" she asked pertinently.

Phil Martin smiled faintly.

"They've more than a mere suspicion, I fancy."

Her lips tightened.

"Well, then," she said tersely, "from even the little I've seen and heard of the underworld amenities I should not care to stand in his shoes. What would you prophesy?"

"The inevitable," he answered promptly. "Some day he'll be bumped off, and that's what's worrying me—not altogether from the humanitarian standpoint, I'll admit, for he's not an asset to any community, but because I've been afraid ever since he began to open up a little that they'd take him for a ride before he came through with me."

"You're honest about it, anyway," she smiled quizzically. "And did it ever occur to you that, being so much in his company you might suffer the penalty that sometimes befalls the innocent bystander?"

"There's always a slight chance, of course," he replied; "but that's part of the game. Anyhow, to continue, I knew he could talk a lot if he wanted to, so I chummed up with him. But it was slow going. He was pretty leery, and he was in bad as it was. I talked to him about the Big Shot, but it was only two or three nights ago that he began to come across—and then I think it was out of revenge and not out of any friendliness for me, once he was sure he wasn't going to get any publicity out of it. He said that three or four years ago he was in another gang, box workers—safes, you know—that was headed by a man named Hal Varney plus a few other convenient names.

"Shive Frank used to be very thick with Varney—used to go off on Coney Island trips and that sort of thing with him. On one of these excursions,

three or four of them had had their pictures taken together. He said he had one of those pictures, but he didn't know where it was. He promised to try to find it for me. Then he said he and Varney had had a row. He claimed that he'd got done on a split, and that Varney had let him down. So Shive left the gang. He said that the gang was still hanging out at the same old place at the back of Izzy Myers's junk shop on First Avenue; and—"

Phil Martin paused, and was silent for a moment while he made another onslaught on his plate.

"I'M afraid I'm rambling a bit and am a little disconnected," he went on finally, "but that's the way Shive Frank was. He said that even at the time he was thick with Varney, Varney was swinging other gangs, doing some bootlegging, backing a fence ring, taking the cut on a crap game—and boasting that he hadn't even begun. I remember the queer way Shive Frank smiled and licked his lips when I said: 'That's the man I'm looking for! There isn't a doubt of it!' 'Sure,' Shive said, 'I knew that from the first. Well, what about it?' 'Can you find him; point him out?' I asked. 'Is he still with that gang at Izzy Myers's place?' 'As far as I know, he's still running it—from off stage,' Shive answered. 'But I don't think many of them know him by the name of Varney any more, and I guess he ain't seen around very much except by a few, and then only on the big stuff. If you ask me, I'd say he's wearing dress shirts a lot these days. It ain't so easy. I ain't seen him for three years."

Enid Howard was leaning forward tensely now as her companion paused again. She could not have explained exactly why. It wasn't just because it was the story of a man-hunt, was it? Perhaps it was the "color" in it. Perhaps it was because the character of this Shive Frank was getting hold of

her—as a peculiarly abhorrent one. Perhaps it was because with each word spoken she was becoming more and more convinced that Phil Martin really was a newspaper man. Perhaps this confidence that he was reposing in her had something to do with it too!

"Yes, go on!" she begged. "I know I'm not giving you much chance to eat anything, but I'm going as soon as I've heard the rest of your story, and then you'll be able to finish your supper in peace."

"On that basis I'd like to drag it out," he told her impulsively. "Honest, I would! And I'm shamefaced enough to admit that's why I told you the story at all—just to keep you here for the little while I have. But I'm afraid there isn't much more to tell. Shive and I, separately and together, tried to locate Varney. He had described the man to me as he remembered him, but a mere description wasn't much to go on so far as I was concerned unless it embodied some distinctive mark of identification—and there isn't any in this case."

"There are many thousands of black-haired, black-eyed, clean-shaved, husky looking men about five feet eight in height, for instance. And Shive couldn't find the photograph. Neither of us got anywhere. And then, just as I was beginning to think we were up against a wall, the luck broke wide open. Shive telephoned me to-day that he'd not only found the photograph, but had got track of Varney himself. I'm to meet Shive later on to-night. That's the whole yarn. What do you think of it?"

She was silent for a moment, her eyes on greasy little Joe Caprillo at the desk, as she marshaled her thoughts and reactions.

"I think," she said at last, "that you will eventually get the Big Shot, and that your paper will score its scoop, thanks to you; but I cannot help feeling that, however much the Big Shot is 'wanted,' I wish it were this

Shive Frank instead that you were after. He is despicable beyond words. He's nothing but a contemptible, cold-blooded squealer. And somehow I wish too"—she hesitated slightly—"that your success might have come through some other medium. Do you mind my saying that?"

"No," he said gravely. "As a matter of fact, I agree with you, though I think the end amply justifies the means in this case. It isn't nice. But there was no other way."

"I suppose not," she admitted a little reluctantly. "Anyway, I want to thank you for telling me the story, and," she smiled in a quick, friendly way, "for trusting me with it. And now I must go! It's an unconscionable hour!" She thrust out her wrist watch for him to see. "Half-past twelve!"

"It's fast," he asserted mendaciously. "Couldn't you—"

"Not possibly!"

"And you won't relent about permitting me to—"

"Not to-night, anyhow."

"Well, that's a concession, at least. In the meantime, I suppose all I can do is bow to the inevitable."

They were both standing. He reached across the table to pick up her hand bag for her. It was rather an exaggerated act of courtesy, as it was a long reach. She noticed that his fingers were feeling surreptitiously over the bag.

"That hard object may be nothing more than my compact," she suggested sweetly.

He flushed suddenly red.

"Oh, damn!" he ejaculated in confusion, and then contritely: "I—I beg your pardon, Miss Howard. But if you won't let me go with you, you will be careful, won't you?"

"I am always careful," she said with a mischievous smile, as she held out her hand. "Good night!"

"Good night!" he answered in a cheery tone—but the gray eyes that

followed a trim and dainty little figure to the door were clouded with a troubled and anxious look.

CHAPTER II.

GANG LAW.

ENID HOWARD was singing. Not aloud, of course. A girl couldn't sing aloud at this hour of night on Third Avenue without inviting attention, even if there weren't so many people about. The song was really in the lightness of her steps, in the poise of her head, and the tinge of heightened color in her cheeks.

She told herself that she was unaccountably happy. And then she contradicted herself. It wasn't unaccountable at all. Why shouldn't she be honest with herself? She no longer had any doubts about the man she had left standing at the table back there in the Gondola. She was glad, far more glad than she had believed possible, that those doubts had vanished, and that Phil Martin was, she was now sure, just what he had described himself to be.

The symphony continued. Mechanically, three blocks away from the Gondola, she turned off the avenue into the cross street on which she lived, and headed in the direction of the East River. And then suddenly the symphony ceased, and a flurry of alarm took its place.

There was not a soul to be seen down the length of the street, but at that instant she had caught the sound of a man's footsteps coming rapidly after her. Perhaps, though, it was merely some wayfarer like herself returning home. She was not the only person who lived on the street! She quickened her pace. The man behind quickened his. She *was* being followed!

The neighborhood was not reassuring. Phil Martin had told her so—had told her it wasn't safe for her

alone at night. She had never thought so before; but now she was conscious of a new and distinctly dismal air about her surroundings—that vacant lot across the way, for instance; the few small scattered stores, closed for the night, that had straggled off the avenue; and the broken line of darkened tenements that stretched before her.

The street wasn't any too well lighted either, she noticed for the first time. What would she do? She had a good deal more than half the block to go yet. Her house was almost at the corner of Second Avenue. Scream for help? She could not imagine herself screaming. Granting even that there was any one to answer her cries in time to be of assistance to her, there would inevitably be an aftermath of publicity about it. She did not want that at all!

Her mind was working rapidly. She was quite cool and collected again. She had told Phil Martin she was entirely able to take care of herself, hadn't she? Well, the man was not more than a few yards behind her now!

She snapped open her hand bag, reached inside, transferred the bag to her left hand, and broke into a run. It would be worth while getting him under that street lamp ahead there just to see who he was.

Then the man's voice reached her.

"Aw, can de marathon stuff!" he called in a hoarse and slightly breathless voice. "I ain't goin' to hurt youse, Miss Howard. I just got a message for youse."

The sound of her name both startled her and brought her relief. She stopped abruptly and whirled around; but, still on her guard, she made no attempt to disguise the fact that a very serviceable little automatic was clasped in her right hand. And then, as the other came up to her, she recognized him even in the still meager light.

"Shive Frank!" she exclaimed.

"Sure!" he answered. His eyes fastened on the automatic in her hand, and a grin spread over his face. "Say, wot d'youse know about dat? A skirt wid a rod! Youse 're some baby, ain't youse?"

Relief fled. His tones were as offensive as his words. His grin was repulsive. She drew back a step.

"What do you want?" she demanded sharply.

"How d'youse get high hat dat way!" he retorted. "I'm doin' dis for a friend of yers." He pulled from his pocket what looked like a piece of torn wrapping paper, folded flat with an elastic band around it. "Dis is for Phil Martin."

"THEN you had better give it to him yourself," she said crisply.

"Say, listen!" his voice was suddenly urgent. "I promised him dis to-night, but I didn't dare go near him. Dey knows him. He's been battin' around a lot wid me. An' I got a tip-off to-night dat I was spotted. See? I'm duckin' me nut right now for a few days on me country estate."

She shook her head.

"I do not care to have anything to do with it," she said emphatically; "but, even if I did, I have no idea when I shall see Mr. Martin again."

"Dat's all right! I ain't askin' youse to take it to him"—the unlovely grin spread itself again over Shive Frank's features—"I'll phone him dat I slipped it to youse. He knows where youse lives, and though dere ain't no particular rush about him gettin' it, I guess mabbe wid dat excuse for a call he'll hop to it fast enough. Here, take it!"

Enid's dark eyes flashed angrily.

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" she declared.

"Dat's where youse 're wrong, den," smirked Shive Frank, "'cause you've got it now! See? Sorry I can't stay, but I told youse I was in a hurry. So-long, Bright Eyes!"

He was already several yards away,

and walking rapidly down the street toward Second Avenue. She gave a little gasp that mingled surprise and dismay, as she stared after him. He had merely dropped the folded piece of wrapping paper on the sidewalk at her feet. She had no choice now but to pick it up.

She restored her automatic to the hand bag, and, picking up the paper, placed that also in the bag. She was angry with the man himself for his loathsome familiarity, and, knowing the man for what he was, was still more incensed that such as he should in any way serve as a connecting link between Phil Martin and herself.

Also she was displeased with Phil Martin. It wasn't very nice of him to have made this possible. Perhaps he could explain why he had shared his gratuitous surveillance with a man like Shive Frank in the first place! Well, he would have an opportunity to explain it the next time they met!

But now she frowned in sudden perplexity. She had no doubt but that the brown paper wrapper contained the photograph of the Big Shot that Phil Martin had said Shive Frank was to give him to-night. What should she do? Phil Martin was undoubtedly still at the Gondola.

But she most certainly did not relish the idea of going back there to him now, inviting the gaze of every eye and the comment of every tongue—and especially because of something that had been so insolently thrust upon her against her will.

Besides, it wasn't a matter of life or death. It wasn't anything that could not wait until to-morrow—Shive Frank had implied that much himself. She would mail it to Phil Martin in the morning. She did not, of course, know where he lived; he had the advantage of her in that particular—she smiled a little icily—but the *Herald-Star* was his business address, and mail would reach him there.

She started on along the street, but

she walked slowly now, thinking, her eyes on the figure of Shive Frank, whom she could still see hurrying down the street ahead of her. Suppose Shive Frank got into telephone communication with Phil Martin during the night, or even in the morning?

Phil Martin would not have received the photograph by then, and some time to-morrow morning he would undoubtedly make that call upon her as Shive Frank had said. Well, after all, what did it matter? If there was ever to be any intimacy between them at all she would have to receive him sooner or later. The present situation was impossible.

She was displeased with Phil Martin—but, the first flush of irritation having passed, not very seriously so. It was only because something unexpected had happened. She had to acknowledge she had not given the matter a second thought in the Gondola when he had admitted that on one occasion at least Shive Frank had been with him when he had followed her. She would, however, not let it pass when he called to-morrow morning.

Oh, so he was to call! Then why mail the photograph? If she were to be logical, she would wait and give it to him when he came—he would receive it that much sooner. But, of course, she could phone him that she *had* mailed it—in which case he wouldn't come at all. She bit at her lips in a rush of confusion, and the color was in her cheeks again.

SHE turned her head suddenly. A car behind her had swung around the corner from Third Avenue at a furious pace. It swept past her now with a roar, its headlights streaming down the street. She stared after it in a startled, fascinated way. She had seen none of its occupants; and, due to the sudden glare of its lights and the speed at which it was traveling, she could not have given the slightest description of the car itself.

She followed it with her eyes. As it approached Second Avenue it seemed to slow a little and swerve in toward the curb; and, as it swerved, its headlights picked out a lone figure on the sidewalk. That would be Shive Frank, of course. There had been no one else on the street, and, in fact, though he had become shadowy in the distance, she had never quite lost sight of him. And now Shive Frank appeared to start running at top speed. Strange!

Mechanically, she could not have told why, she began to hurry herself. And then, with a low, strained cry, she stood stock-still. Vicious spurts of flame were cutting through the semi-darkness from the side of the car, and now she could hear the crackle of a fusillade of shots. It seemed to have happened instantaneously — quicker than thought. The car had never stopped—and now it was tearing across Second Avenue—and now she could no longer see it. Shive Frank! Intuitively she knew what had happened. The warning of which he had spoken had reached him too late!

She caught her breath in a horror-stricken gasp, and started to run toward the corner. There seemed to be an insensate orgy of this sort of thing in New York. It wasn't so many nights ago that, in full view of the stream of pedestrians that was passing to and fro, they had even shot down a man in the theater district of Broadway where it was as bright as day. It was hideous!

She ran on impulsively, blindly. It could have taken her but little more than a minute to reach the corner; but, as if by magic, Second Avenue had already supplied a small crowd, which was constantly being augmented. People were rushing to the spot from all directions. The number of those congregated, however, was not as yet so great but that she could see.

It was Shive Frank who lay there motionless on the sidewalk. She had had no doubt of that from the moment

the shots had been fired, but she felt her face whiten now. It was not a pleasant sight. Just a few minutes ago this crumpled heap had been alive.

The man had been repugnant to her, but now she knew only pity and a tigerish resentment in the face of callous and cold-blooded murder. And this was the most cowardly of all types of murder. Taken unawares and shot down by men afraid to give their victim even a chance to defend himself! Her lips curled in bitter contempt. Brave men, these gangsters and racketeers!

Dead? Was Shive Frank dead? How did she know? Perhaps he was only wounded and unconscious. What were they saying?

Three or four men were bending over the prone figure on the sidewalk. She was being jostled, pressed closer, by the newcomers to the scene. Everybody was talking—morbidly, excitedly, hysterically, some in awestruck tones: "Who did it? How did it happen? Took him for a ride, eh? Is he alive? I seen de car dat done it—God rest his soul! Some nifty job, I'll tell de world!"

ONE of the men got up from the sidewalk and brushed his knees nervously. He delivered his verdict with twisted lips.

"Croaked? Sure, he's croaked! They splashed him plenty. He's a sieve, see—just a damn sieve!" He laughed raucously.

"Don't nobody know who he is," wailed a woman's voice.

Half a dozen voices answered at once; one rose above the others:

"I'll say I know him! It's Shive Frank out on his last, long vacation from the big house—that's who he is!"

Both the man's words and voice jangled—callously, horribly out of tune. Perhaps it wasn't intentional. Perhaps it was only nerves. Enid shivered, and began to edge her way back out of the crowd.

Here came the patrolman on post, breathless from his run of possibly a block away! Pretty soon there would be a car from district detective headquarters. Questions! There wasn't anything she could tell that would be of any immediate value. Shive Frank had already been identified. Others had seen the car, and had seen the shooting at closer range than she had.

She did not want to be questioned—not to-night, anyhow. The girl who had been with Shive Frank just before he was shot! The reporters would make a lot out of that. Headlines! Would the story of the photograph be of any value to the police? The police might think so anyway. They would certainly ask her to go over to the station house. They would want to see the photograph. It was in her bag. So was an automatic. Suppose they saw that, too!

In the circumstances, they would be suspicious at once. Of what? Anything! Everything! A steer for the gang that had killed Shive Frank, for instance. She would be a marked woman until they had probed her past and present to the point when they could probe no more—and then still be suspicious!

No—decidedly not to-night! And, besides, it would bring Phil Martin into the affair. Before she said anything, she would consult with him. If he thought it were necessary, that it had any bearing on Shive Frank's murder, he could tell the story of the photograph to the police far better and more intimately than she could, or, in any case, prevent any undue publicity being given to her.

It was only a few steps to the small, somewhat dingy house in which she lived. Indeed, the crowd had become so great now that, overflowing the corner, its outer fringe reached almost to her doorway. She gained the stoop, and stood for a moment looking around her. How they pushed and milled—like animals scenting blood!

An unkempt urchin had climbed to a point of vantage on the standard of a street lamp. There was noise, confusion, the chatter of a multitude of tongues. She heard the clang of an ambulance or police wagon around the corner—probably the latter, for the next instant came sharp, barked orders to disperse. The crowd suddenly surged backward. She hurriedly opened the door, and let herself in.

The house was in darkness. She passed along the hall, opened a door, and, switching on the light, entered a modestly furnished bedroom. Her temples were throbbing. Her hat felt like a band of tight-drawn steel. She almost tore it from her head. Her mind was in riot. The thing had shaken her. She drew her hands across her eyes, fighting for composure.

YES, now she was quite all right again. She pulled out a bureau drawer, and, opening her bag, took out the automatic. The brown paper wrapper fell to the floor. She noticed that the elastic band had gone. It had probably rubbed against the automatic while she was running. She tucked the automatic away under a pile of lingerie in the drawer, closed the drawer, and picked up the brown paper wrapper.

It became unfolded as she lifted it. There was nothing inside. She knitted her brows in a puzzled way. Had the photograph slipped out when Shive Frank had dropped the wrapper on the sidewalk? That could hardly be, for, though it had obviously been insecurely wrapped, she would have noticed that. In her bag, then? Had it slipped out in there? She looked hastily in the bag. Yes, here it was!

The Big Shot! She looked at it curiously. It had obviously been a snapshot of a group, but now both ends were cut off, and only the face and figure remained. A very clear and distinct photograph for a snapshot, she thought.

And then suddenly she stared more closely at the photograph, stared at it for a long time with widened eyes. There was noise outside, the police were still dispersing the crowd; inside the room there was no sound save for a low, broken cry that was like a sob.

"The Big Shot—the Big Shot—the Big Shot—" The words were repeating themselves over and over, racing like some ghastly refrain through her brain.

The Big Shot—the man at whose door untold crimes were laid! A gangster, a racketeer, a thief, a smirched thing—oh, God, perhaps a murderer!

And standing there in front of the bureau, she saw herself in the mirror. No, not herself. It was some one she had never seen before. Strange dark eyes that were full of pain and terror, burned back at her out of a bloodless, ashen face, a face that was like a ghost's.

The photograph fluttered to the bureau-top. She shut her eyes—and swayed a little.

The Big Shot was her brother.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER MIDNIGHT.

REACTION came. Every faculty she possessed rose up in fierce denial. It looked like Roy. She did not believe any two human beings could look so much alike; but, then, this was only a photograph, and a snapshot, at that. And, besides, Roy was dead. Dead! How did she know? She had never been sure of that. She had never, even now after all these years, quite given up hope.

She looked dully around her for a moment; then, with a sudden tightening of her lips, she picked up the snapshot, and opening the door of a connecting room, entered the latter and switched on the light.

From between portraits of her mother and father on the mantelpiece, she

took down a cabinet-sized, silver-framed photograph of a smiling, dark-eyed, clear-cut young soldier in Canadian uniform, and carried it to a flat-topped desk that stood in the center of the room. Here she pushed to one side a typewriter and some sheets of manuscript, laid the snapshot and the framed photograph on the desk beside each other, and sat down in front of them.

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. Roy! They had been such chums. He had been older, of course, but not so very much older. He had been too young, when the war broke out, to go over with the first Canadian contingent; but he had enlisted the day he had become old enough to do so. She had been so proud of him. That was all she had ever shown him—her pride in him. Young as she had been, she had never let him see her tears. He had gone over in '17—that was twelve years ago. She had been not quite thirteen then, and he eighteen.

He had never come back. Just a few months before the armistice he had been reported missing. "Missing!" "Killed in action" would have been easier to bear. "Missing!" There was something unutterably cruel in that, a more poignant grief, a grief that time would not heal, a grief that fruitless hope kept alive. It had hastened her mother's end. Even to the last, with her bed drawn to the window, her mother had watched the street. "Roy will come. Roy will come," she had insisted. But Roy had never come. "Missing!" That was all.

Had he come now—like this? The tears were gone, and in their place a frightened look was in her eyes. She was afraid, terribly afraid, that in spite of the fact it couldn't possibly be true, it—it—

Her mind seemed to falter. What was she trying to tell herself? That Roy, her brother, that fearless, clean kid she had adored and worshiped, might be this crook and criminal the

police were seeking? Well, it wasn't true! Her clenched hands beat upon the desk. It wasn't true!

She grew calmer. It could do her no possible good to give way like this. She bent over the photographs and began to study and compare them critically. There was a difference in years, of course, but the same distinctive features were there. And then suddenly she laughed a little unnaturally. Surely she did not need to compare photographs in order to recognize her own brother!

She drew the snapshot closer to her and, with the aid of a reading glass which she took from a drawer in the desk, studied it intently for a few minutes. Her hand was unsteady, trembling a little, as she finally laid down the glass. The enlargement had only verified her first impression. It was Roy.

Her elbows were on the table now, her head tightly clasped in her hands. How her temples throbbed—like hammer blows that brought physical hurt! She stared straight before her.

GRANTING that it was Roy, it didn't mean that he was what they said he was; that he was a much sought-after criminal; that he was the Big Shot whom Phil Martin was so eager to trap. That, on the face of it, was an absurdity. Roy *couldn't* be a criminal. There was some mistake somewhere. Shive Frank had admittedly been a miserable scoundrel. His word was worth nothing.

And yet—one hand dragged itself heavily across her forehead—why should Shive Frank have singled out an innocent man? And how, unless they had in some way been brought together, would a photograph of Roy be in the possession of a man of Shive Frank's stamp?

Shive Frank had said that it was a snapshot of a group. It obviously had been. But both ends had been cut

off, and only Roy remained. Shive Frank, who had claimed to have been in the original picture, would, in such case, very naturally use the scissors before turning the snapshot over to a newspaper.

In one sense this bore out his contention that he had been one of the group; on the other hand, it might mean he had simply destroyed the evidence that would have proved he was lying—that it might have been a snapshot of a perfectly innocent little group of friends. But how, then, in the first place, had Shive Frank obtained a picture in which Roy was included?

But that was not all. There—there was something else. She sat quite still now fighting for self-control. This was a picture of Roy; she was sure of it, certain of it. In her mind there lingered not a single doubt. Therefore Roy was alive! He had not only not been killed in France, but he had been here on this side of the water, in America, for at least several years. The snapshot itself certainly bore out in appearance one of Shive Frank's statements—that it had been taken three or four years ago.

Why, then, had Roy never come home to the mother who was watching and waiting for him, to the father who sorrowed and who at that time had still been alive, to her who loved him so dearly—to them all—to his own people—turning sadness into joy? Why had he never written? Why had there been neither word nor sign from him to those who grieved and mourned his loss, the while he was alive and well in New York?

Like a crushed thing her head went down on the desk and was buried in her arms. Her shoulders shook convulsively.

"I don't believe it!" she moaned. "I will never believe it—never, never, never—until I have found him, seen him with my own eyes, until he himself has told me it is true!"

The black moment passed.

Find him? Yes, she would find him! She rose impulsively to her feet, her head thrown back, her eyes alight with resolution. The game, in a sense, was all in her own hands. Shive Frank would never telephone to Phil Martin now, and Phil Martin would never know she had the photograph—and neither would the police! Both the police and Phil Martin must be kept out of this until she had found Roy.

Her brows knitted suddenly together. And then—what? If Roy really proved to be the Big Shot? She shook her head. She refused to answer that, even to consider it. One bridge at a time! She had not found Roy yet. The matter of the immediate moment was to search for him.

Well, she was free to do that. There was no one to question her comings or her goings. For another two weeks, anyway, she would be alone here in this house.

HER eyes fell upon the scattered sheets of manuscript beside the typewriter. A queer, tight smile crept across her lips. Strange that this should have come about directly through her work!

Three years ago her mother had died; less than a year ago her father had died. She had not wanted to live alone in the old home in Winnipeg any more, even if she had been able to maintain it, which the modest competence she had inherited, though quite sufficient for her personal needs, would not have permitted in any case.

She had written a few obscure short stories, and then had made up her mind to do something more ambitious—a book. And then it had become a question of some place to go, where she could devote herself to her work.

She had thought of Martha Debbins. Martha had been in the household so many years, both as Roy's and her nurse and in other capacities, that she had become almost like one of the fam-

ily. Those childhood years were indissolubly associated with Martha. Then Martha had married and gone to live in New York. But Enid had never lost touch with Martha. Always at Christmas she had sent little gifts, and there had been an exchange of letters.

Martha had seemed to solve the problems from all angles, for, from everything Enid had heard and read, New York's East Side; with its colorful mingling of all nationalities and reflecting so many variant and intense phases of life, had appealed to her strongly as a setting for a book—and she had, of course, known Martha's circumstances intimately before she had written asking if she might come to board with her old nurse until the book was written.

Martha's husband had been dead for a number of years. He had been a small tradesman, and had left her this little house she lived in and almost enough to get along on. For the rest, Martha was an excellent seamstress, and so she and her two little girls, now eight and ten years of age respectively, managed very comfortably indeed. Martha had welcomed Enid's suggestion with eager enthusiasm, and so—well, she was here.

And Martha was away now with her children on a visit to some of her husband's relations on the Maine coast. That was why of late Enid had been frequenting the cafés and restaurants so much, taking her meals at perhaps unusual hours, but at hours which, with no one but herself to consider, she had made to fit in with her moods for work; and that was why, too, there was no one to question and no one to know what she did or where she went in the present circumstances.

She glanced at her wrist watch. One o'clock. It seemed incredible that it was no later—that it was only half an hour since she had left Phil Martin in the Gondola—that in a scant half hour Shive Frank had been murdered and

this cataclysmic thing had come into her life!

She laughed out a little—suddenly, unnaturally. What did it matter that it had been merely half an hour? All that mattered was that it was still not too late to do something now, at once—to begin her search for Roy to-night. Not to-morrow—now! There was more than one reason for instant action. One was outstanding. Apart from the urge of her own feelings and the fact that she had a possible clew to follow which was more likely to be successful in the night hours than in the daylight, it was vital that she should find Roy before Phil Martin did.

Her head drooped a little. Before Phil Martin did! Somehow that brought an added pang. Her head came up again courageously. Yes, before Phil Martin did! Well, she had as much to go on as Phil Martin had; the same clew—and more. All Phil Martin knew was what Shive Frank had told him about the gang that had a rendezvous at Izzy Myers's; but with Shive Frank dead and the photograph in her possession, Phil Martin would be hard put to it to identify the man he was after—even if the Big Shot ever went to Izzy Myers's place in person, which Shive Frank had admitted was extremely doubtful.

IT was a slender clew, but it was the only one she had. The one thing she could do now was to go to Izzy Myers's place on First Avenue. Her brows furrowed. A voice within told her it was a perilous, impossible thing for a girl to do at such an hour as this.

She smiled gravely. Perilous, yes; impossible, no! She could not let the peril to herself hold her back where Roy was concerned.

It was her single chance. She had come to know the neighborhood well, and she knew approximately where Izzy Myers's junk shop was—not more

than four or five blocks away. She did not expect to find Roy there, from what Shive Frank had said, but there might be some of the gang present through whom she might obtain another clew that would lead her to Roy himself.

How? What did she intend to do? Walk in on the gang? She shook her head almost angrily. She did not know what she would do until she got there; she only knew that it was the one possible starting point. That was sufficient for the moment.

Well, she had better go, then, hadn't she? The minutes were flying. She picked up the snapshot and the photograph in the silver frame, and, carrying them into her bedroom, locked them in her trunk. There would be no portraits of Roy in evidence anywhere. It might be exaggerated caution to lock the framed photo away too, but it was at least safer that way.

And now she restored the automatic to her hand bag and stood for a moment inspecting herself critically in the mirror. The result satisfied her. She was all in black naturally—her father's death had been very recent—and she was therefore as inconspicuously dressed as she could be. She could do nothing more in that respect.

She extinguished the lights, and let herself out, locking the front door behind her; and then, standing on the stoop, she looked around her. The crowd had gone. There was no sign of the tragedy of a little while ago.

But for an instant she hesitated. Another thought had come to her. Suppose Phil Martin went to Izzy Myers's to-night too; it was his only lead, also. No—he would go there some time, no doubt, but it was hardly likely that it would be to-night; he would be too much occupied with Shive Frank's murder.

But if he did?

She lifted her shoulders in a grim little fatalistic way, and, descending

the stoop, started to walk quickly toward First Avenue. That was another risk she would have to take!

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAIR.

FIRST AVENUE was quiet. There were not many pedestrians about, but Enid was twice obliged to pass the unlighted windows and closed front door of Izzy Myers's junk shop before the way was clear to explore the lane or driveway that, flanking one side of the junk shop, obviously led to the rear of the premises. Then, satisfied that there was no longer any one near enough to observe her movements, she slipped into the lane.

And then, instinctively, she halted. Here, a few paces in from the street, it was as though she had been suddenly confronted with an impenetrable wall of blackness. She could see nothing, and the blackness was ugly. In one sense she realized that this afforded her a certain protection; but she had never before realized that the darkness possessed a psychological terror that was all its own. Her heart was beating furiously. She told herself she was not very brave.

What was beyond the darkness at the other end of this lane? The front of the junk shop was shut and dark. Was there any one in the back part? Or was it a night when the whole place was deserted by everybody? She had believed that there was more likelihood of the gang congregating here at night than in broad daylight; she still believed so. That was why, apart from her anxiety to forestall Phil Martin, she had not dared let the night slip away from her without doing her utmost to turn it to account.

Her lips firmed. She might be afraid, just as any other girl might be under like circumstances, but at least she was not a coward. Since there was nothing

to be seen in front, the rear of the premises had to be explored, or there would have been no use in her coming here at all.

She reached out with her hand through the darkness, touched the wall of the house, and, guiding herself thereby, stepped resolutely forward again.

But now she walked cautiously, striving to make no noise. It seemed a long way, and the darkness seemed even to become constantly more opaque. Doubts began to assail her. Suppose the gang was here, what could she do? The phrase repeated itself—what could she do? Here she was, a girl, alone, daring a criminal lair! Impulse had brought her, and the situation was absurd. What, for instance, was she going to do with this automatic that she had taken from her hand bag?

And then suddenly, angrily, she flung the doubts aside. She wasn't fair to herself. It wasn't impulse that had brought her here—it was Roy. There might be very little hope of success, but it wasn't absurd. There was a chance of something she might hear or see or do, and she had taken it. She would take it again to-morrow, if need be, and all the to-morrows thereafter—take any chance, do anything, risk anything, grasp at any straw to find Roy.

Her lips were moving silently.

"Oh, Roy, what did it mean? What could it mean? Roy! Roy!"

She came to an abrupt stop. She had reached the end of the wall and had mechanically turned the corner of the house. Some one was here! Her heart began to pound again, but it was with excitement now, not fear. Facing her she could see chinks of light from two shuttered windows on the ground floor.

She glanced swiftly around her. It was not so dark here as it had been in the lane. She was in an open space—the yard, of course, the junk yard.

Objects showed up in irregular outline; that was a cart over there. And the rear entrance to the house was obviously through an extension built out at right angles into the yard. That was why she was facing those two lighted windows. Voices reached her, muffled; the words were indistinguishable.

THE windows were only a few steps in front of her, and she began to make her way on tiptoe toward the one from which the voices emanated—the one nearer the rear of the extension. As she approached the voices became more distinct and were intermingled with frequent and curious little rattling and thumping sounds—and she was suddenly grateful for the fact that it was a hot, breathless night, which accounted for the window behind the closed shutters being open, as it obviously must be to have enabled her to hear anything at all. And now she could see that the shutters were in bad repair, and that some of the slats were askew where the chinks of light seeped through.

The ground was uneven and strewn with all sorts of rubbish. It was not easy for her to pick her way. She had already tripped over something once, though without making any noise, and now within a yard of the window she tripped again. A small stone rolled over beneath her foot. In her own ears it made a thunderous sound.

She felt the color leave her face. She waited breathlessly. Nothing! She rallied herself. This wouldn't do; she couldn't afford to become even a little bit panicky. Common sense told her that the sound had been so slight it couldn't possibly have been heard from within. She forced a facetious little smile to her lips. She had stalked the big game in the darkness before without losing her head, hadn't she? Then surely she could do it again. The next instant she was standing at the window.

The sill was shoulder high. She peered in through the slats where they were out of alignment. There were five men inside there throwing dice against a raised board on a table. That was the rattling and thumping sound she had heard. Craps! Her education had gone that far, thanks in this particular to Phil Martin, who had explained the game to her.

In an almost startled way she turned her head from the window and looked around her in the darkness. Always Phil Martin! She had even had to face the possibility of his coming here, too, to-night! For the moment she had forgotten that; but, at any rate, there had been no sign of him.

She peered in again through the slats. The five men were in shirt sleeves, not a pleasant-looking crowd, though most of them were young. One of them had a thin and almost abnormally pasty-white face—a drug addict, she decided.

Some of them laughed as they played, but there was nothing pleasant in their laughter, either—it was raucous, coarse, hardened, intermingled with blasphemy. A great deal of money was changing hands. With their coats off, the holster at each man's belt was plainly in evidence.

Her eyes swept around the room—what she could see of it. As a hang-out it had the appearance of innocence itself. It was apparently nothing but a storeroom for junk. Izzy Myers, it would seem, bought and sold and dealt in every conceivable manner of thing, from rugs and old carpets to decrepit furniture, stoves, and battered tin washboilers. These articles and countless others of the same ilk were littered about everywhere.

There were two doors in the room, one at either end. Both were closed. The one at the lower end opened, of course, on the yard, and made the rear entrance to the disreputable establishment; and, patently, the door at the upper end opened into an inner room.

She nodded her head sharply. That was the other room, through whose shuttered window she had also seen chinks of light. What was in there?

She moved stealthily along the side of the wall, and reached the second window. Her view here was even less obstructed than before—some of the slats were even more askew than at the first window. Also the window itself was likewise open.

Izzy Myers himself! She had never seen Izzy Myers, but there was no mistaking the proprietor of the junk shop in the present surroundings. He was speaking excitedly into a telephone that stood on the grime-streaked, flat-topped desk at which he was seated.

"SURE, they are! Yes, both of 'em. Oh, he's all right, no worse than usual. What?"

Then followed the sharp, sibilant sound of Izzy Myers's breath being drawn greedily in through his bearded lips.

Enid stared in through the slats.

Izzy Myers's eyes were greedy, too—little black eyes that were dancing exultantly. But now there was silence in the room. Izzy Myers wasn't talking any more—just listening—listening intently, interminably.

She inspected the room—Izzy Myers probably dignified it by the name of office. It was less littered than the other room, but equally dirty. It possessed two uninviting chairs beside the one in which Izzy Myers sat. There was a safe in one corner that had lost most of its paint. A dirty account book lay open on the desk, where Izzy Myers had presumably been working when the telephone call had disturbed his labors. Even from where she stood she could see that the writing was crude and scrawled.

She was studying Izzy Myers himself now. In spite of the filth and disorder that was his background, and the dirty, ill-fitting clothes he wore, there was something incongruous about the

man. A vagrant thought obtruded itself. If it were only material for her book that she was after to-night!

She could readily picture Izzy Myers going about his business as a fawning and obsequious Jew peddler, but there was nothing about him to indicate anything of that sort now. As he sat there at the phone, he was alert and tense. There was cunning in his bearded face—but there was something more. Something that she could not quite define unless it were to say that he exuded a sort of ugly efficiency. In the few words she had heard, he had not spoken particularly like a Jew, either.

He at once repelled and intrigued her. She was conscious of the feeling that he was no ordinary man, and that he and his junk shop camouflaged far more than a mere hangout for a few gangsters. Neither did she think he was as old as that crooked back, those round, drooping shoulders, that unkempt shock of white hair, and that brown beard flecked with gray made him look—in any case, he couldn't be more than somewhere in the middle fifties, she believed.

He was still listening at the phone—listening eagerly. And he was smiling now, not mirthfully, but with a sort of oily rapaciousness. What was it about? It must be something of unusual importance. Of course it hadn't been as long as it had seemed, but—

He was suddenly speaking again, nodding his head vigorously at his unseen auditor as though to add emphasis to his words.

"I get you all the way! It's a killing! Sure, they'll both be there! I'll give 'em the dope. Anything else? . . . No? All right! Good luck!"

He replaced the receiver on the hook, got up briskly from the desk, and opened the door connecting with the other room where the crap game was in progress.

"You, there, Skinny, and you, too, Maloch," he called, "cut that out, and come on in here! I want to see you."

Without waiting for a reply he went back to the desk and sat down.

Enid's eyes were on the connecting doorway now, and a moment later the thin, pale-faced young man, whom she had already classified as a drug addict, came into the room with one of his companions.

"Shut the door, Skinny," directed Izzy Myers.

"What's up?" demanded the pale-faced young man as he obeyed.

Izzy Myers grinned and rubbed his hands together avariciously.

"A lot!" he answered. "There's plenty busting loose in this little old burg to-night I been talking on the phone."

"Yeh?" It was the other man—Maloch—who spoke now. "Some more about Shive Frank?"

Izzy Myers shook his head somewhat impatiently.

"What's there more to hear about him? It's only the cops that 'll buzz their heads off—and they got a hot chance! Listen! I just been talking to the Big Shot, and he wants you two birds for a little job he's pulling personally before the cold gray dawn beats him to it."

"Him? Personally? With us? Skinny circled his lips with his tongue excitedly. "Is that straight?"

"Sure, it's straight, and he asked for you two guys particular. You, Skinny, 'cause you're pretty slick with locks, I guess; and Maloch, 'cause he's the handiest of the bunch with his rod if it's needed. D'ye think I'm handing you a steer?"

INSTINCTIVELY Enid drew back a little from the shutter. The pounding of her heart sounded so loud to her that it seemed as though they must have heard it, too. The Big Shot! They were talking about the Big Shot. These two men were to keep a rendezvous with him to-night.

"Oh, go on! Go on!" she pleaded silently under her breath.

"Spill it!" invited Maloch tersely.

Izzy Myers smiled cryptically.

"Well, the short of it is that Twisty Morgan and his mob pulled a big jewel break to-night and got away with it—but they didn't get far away."

"Yeh?" Maloch's eyes narrowed. "Twisty's lucky! He's lived six months longer now than I thought he would. Him and his gang of double-crossing smarts! We owe him plenty, and we was going to give him the spot to square it last winter only the Big Shot wasn't for it. Is that what we do to-night? Say, it 'll make me happy. I've been feeling sore about the delay."

Skinny coughed rackingly from his thin chest.

"To hell with Twisty! What 'd you say about the break? Where was it?"

"I don't know—somewhere down town," Izzy Myers answered. "You'll read all about it in the morning papers along with Shive Frank. What counts is that they had to stage their get-away in a hurry with no time to make the split, and the Big Shot knows where the stuff is parked."

"And where's that?" inquired Skinny eagerly.

Izzy Myers dropped a secretive eyelid.

"The Big Shot wasn't talking for publication over the phone, and he didn't say. But he slipped me a hint that 'll maybe give you the low-down on it. Don't Twisty's old dame live up somewhere around here, and ain't she supposed to have fired Twisty out of the house a couple of years ago 'cause he was a bad egg and a disgrace to his poor old widowed mother?"

"Sure, she does!" growled Maloch viciously. "But her firing Twisty out is the bunk. She's worse than he is, but the only reason for that is that he's young yet, and his education ain't finished the way hers is. If you ask me, this erring son and sorrowing mamma stuff ain't nothing but a blind, and the police have fell for it, and got it handed to them lots. Blast the two of 'em,

I know 'em; and I know where her place is. She just puts up a front."

"Is it anywhere near Eightieth and Second Avenue?" asked Izzy Myers softly.

"If that's a guess, it's a good one," Maloch grunted.

Izzy Myers rubbed his hands together unctuously.

"Well, that's the answer, then," he said. "The Big Shot said you two was to meet him at the foot of the 'L' steps at Eightieth and Second in as near around half an hour as you could. Skinny, you'd better load up with what door tools you need, and then beat it. And tell the boys out there to stick around in case anything busts bad and they're wanted. You got plenty of time, 'cause the less you're seen hanging around up there waiting for some one, the better. Ride the ozone up and

it 'll be just about right, and you'll look natural coming down the steps when you get there. See? There ain't—"

Enid heard no more. She was stealing back again across the junk yard. In the lane she broke into a run. She ran again on the cross street making for Second Avenue whenever she was sure she was not observed. She kept on curiously telling herself the same thing over and over again:

That the Big Shot would be at Eightieth Street and Second Avenue in half an hour—no, less than half an hour. And that she must get there before those two men did, or they would all have gone away again, and she would not be able to see with her own eyes whether the Big Shot were really Roy. And that she must hurry—hurry—hurry!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

U U U

Heroism at Sea

THE rescue of the crew of the freighter Florida by the officers and crew of the SS America at the risk of their own lives was only one more instance of heroism at sea where daring death is all in the day's work.

No braver men ever sailed than the seven who remained with the Alpha when she struck a reef in Union Bay; the chief officer and twenty-four men reached the mainland, but Captain Yorke and the six seamen who stood by perished with the ship. There was Second Mate Hamilton, of the Savonnia, lost on Lake Superior; he loved his wife and the baby he had never seen, but loved his ship more and went to the bottom with it. When the German training frigate Gneisenau foundered off Malaga in sight of land, the cadets climbed the rigging and waved their caps and cheered for the Fatherland until the waves closed over them.

Even greater was the courage of William Ode, of the Courtney Ford, beached in a fog on Izenbeck Island, Alaska. Captain and crew were taken off by a passing vessel, but somebody had to stay with the ship to prevent her destruction by roving Eskimos, and Ode volunteered to stay until a wrecking crew could be sent from Seattle. It never came, and revenue men found his body beside the log in which he had recorded to the last the tragic story of four months alone.

A battalion of British soldiers stood at attention on the deck of the sinking transport Tyndareus after she struck a floating mine off Cape Agulhas; the fact that two ships came to the rescue before the transport went under detracts nothing from the courage of the Middlesex men.

Minna Irving.



*As the crouching bandits whirled,
Hutchins's pistol barked twice*

Bamboo War

*Lieutenant Hutchins, with the Marines in Nicaragua, takes a little spin
in the air over Sandino's guerrillas*

By E. L. NALENCE

"AFTER all," said DuBois, setting down his entire coffee cup, "you really cannot refer to this ridiculous mess as anything but a 'bamboo war'—the Marines are doing nothing more in Nicaragua than police work against a few scattered bands of guerrillas headed by self-titled generals, lacking uniforms and training, and with only the most sketchy sort of military equipment."

Stahlberg bit off the end of a cigar reflectively, and glanced at Lieutenant Douglas Hutchins, of the United States Marine Corps aviation service, before answering.

The three had just finished luncheon at the Commercial Club in Managua—

DuBois, manager of a large banana plantation; Stahlberg, a Central American representative of an American agricultural machinery firm, and Hutchins, long-legged, lean and tow-headed, who, since his taste of flying during the World War, had found civil and business life unbearable and had gone back to the only occupation that had ever furnished him with the thrills he considered essential to life.

"I don't think you're being quite fair," said Stahlberg, finally. "The chap who's killed by a bullet from a Nicaraguan irregular's rifle is just as dead as the fellow who stopped a Jerry machine gun bullet at Soissons, isn't he? You can call them bandits or

patriots, depending on your point of view, but you can't deny that they'll fight as savagely as any body of men in the world, aided by a wild country that they know thoroughly, and our boys don't."

"Oh, of course, of course," DuBois broke in impatiently. "But my point is that the newspapers back home are overplaying the whole silly business, trying to give it the dignity of a war. I admit that the Marines are having a tough job of it, but then so has a cop back home when he sets out to corral a holdup man—and you wouldn't call that a war, would you? Look at your casualty lists. There aren't as many names on them as there would have been in a single day's action on a twenty-foot section of a front line during the big fracas."

"Take Hutchins, here. He knows what war is; he was over in that real shindig. What's he do here? He makes observation flights, and if he sees any concentration of Sandino's forces, he either drops a few bombs on 'em, or else sprays 'em with hot lead. But does he ever get any action from them? No. They haven't a single plane. All they can do is pop at him with rifles, and if he gets one bullet hole in his ship, it's an exciting day. Why, this is nothing but a tempest in a tea-pot, nothing more than a typical Central-American 'bamboo war.' Isn't that right, Hutchins?"

The flyer smiled, but as he opened his lips to speak, a Marine orderly strode up to the table and snapped into a salute.

"Major Weldon's compliments, sir," he said. "He'd like to see you immediately."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" asked Stahlberg, as Hutchins rose.

"Oh, no. It'll be just another observation flight, probably."

"Well, don't forget we're having dinner together here to-night," warned DuBois. "Sort of farewell party. I'm going back to the plantation to-mor-

row, and Stahlberg's got to drum up a little trade."

"Righto, I'll be here. So long."

"So long."

MAJOR WELDON, commander of the Marine flying detachment, looked up from the mass of papers on the desk before him and nodded as Hutchins entered and stood at attention.

"Sit down, Hutchins!" he said, and absently drummed on the desk with the fingers of one hand as the flyer folded his lanky body into a chair. A frown added to the lines on the major's forehead.

"Hutchins, I'm worried about Loud and Chase. As you know, they went out to bomb Sandino at El Chipote this morning at dawn. They were due back here hours ago."

"Maybe they stopped over at Ocotal, or one of the other posts between here and El Chipote," suggested Hutchins.

"That was what I had hoped. But Darrell went out later in the morning and visited all three landing fields. He got back a half hour ago, and reported no trace of them."

Hutchins whistled softly. Both Bud Chase and Steve Loud were younger than he by five years, but in the year or so that they had been in the same flight a great attachment had been formed between them.

"Good Lord," he muttered, half to himself, "I hope they haven't crashed into the jungle."

"That's what worries me," said the major. "And that's what I want you to find out. Take that little Corsair I've had wheeled out for you, and see if you can't find them. She'll carry three in a pinch. I'd give you a bigger ship, but you may have to land under difficulties and that little bus can land and take off on a dime. Your best bet will be to retrace their course to El Chipote and back, and scour the country for any trace of a wrecked plane."

Hutchins nodded and rose. "Yes, sir. I'll be off as soon as I get my flying clothes on."

Ten minutes later he stood on the field adjusting his helmet straps, his eyes caressing the tiny Vought Corsair fighting plane that stood, wheels chocked and motor roaring, ready to take off.

He ran one hand tenderly along its side, as a horseman fondles a thoroughbred.

Then he pulled himself up into the cockpit, looked over his gauges, shook the stick and kicked the rudder to make sure his controls were free, and waved his hand to the mechanics.

They pulled the blocks out from under the wheels and he opened his throttle and began rolling forward. A glance at the wind cone gave him its direction and he turned slightly, into the wind, and gave her the gun. The field swept beneath him, then there was a slight bump and he was off. The little ship roared over the field and then zoomed as quickly and gracefully as a cat leaping to a high board fence.

As he swung the ship's nose northeast toward El Chipote, Hutchins's thoughts were all of his missing chums. If Chase and Loud had crashed, which seemed very likely, then they were in sore straits indeed. The country about the hidden fastness of Sandino was mountainous and densely wooded, and would present almost insurpassable difficulties to downed flyers struggling to find their way out of the tropic forests without native guidance.

There was always the chance of running into a band of Sandinistas out on a foray. Hutchins shook his head glumly. They'd surely be in one hell of a fix if they really had lost their wings.

Flying low and checking himself constantly with his compass and charts, he kept on toward El Chipote in as straight a line as he could, scan-

ning the country beneath him carefully.

AN hour later, when El Chipote lifted its bulk against the sky, his systematic search had revealed no trace of wreckage or of any untoward disturbance below. Puzzled and worried, he veered off to the side of the mountain on which Sandino had his headquarters.

A moment later a collection of huts, half-screened by the luxuriant vegetation, swung into view. These were the shacks that housed the guerrilla leader's staff. Suddenly a dozen or more scattered puff balls of smoke appeared as the Sandinistas sighted him and began firing with rifles.

Hutchins drove on, ignoring the futile sharpshooting, and in a few minutes had passed out of range. Still there was no trace of the missing flyers. He decided to circle the mountain, on the chance that Loud and Chase had done the same.

He was almost halfway around El Chipote when he saw more puffs of smoke below, to the left, toward the mountainside, and he thought he heard the chatter of a machine gun above the sound of his motor. He swept on, taking these for further ambitious attempts on the part of some roving band to down him, when his eye suddenly caught that which he had been seeking.

There was a blackened spot in the dense green below him, and his eye discerned a tangled mass of charred wreckage. He circled and dived to five hundred feet. As he flew past the place again he cut off his motor for a moment and listened intently. There was no mistaking it; he heard a short burst from a machine gun, that seemed to come from a bare, rocky place on the side of the mountain. And as he went by he caught a glimpse of khaki.

Wheeling and dropping further, he passed closer, so low that his wingtips almost brushed the trees. This time

his trained observer's eye took in the situation thoroughly. In a cave in the mountainside were two khaki-clad figures, who waved as he went by. From the jungle about them came spurts of smoke from the guerillas' rifles.

Hutchins's heart leaped with joy as he realized that Chase and Loud, at bay in the cave, were for the moment safe. Apparently they had dismantled one of the guns from their ship before burning the wreck, and were using it to good advantage in keeping off their besiegers.

They commanded the area before them, and above the entrance to the cave there was a sheer rise of rock, sloping slightly outward, which protected them from above. But the very impregnability of their position made it impossible for them to escape. The Sandinistas had only to wait until the Marines' ammunition was exhausted.

Puzzled and worried, his mind a whirl of half-formed plans and ideas, Hutchins circled and circled, ignoring the bullets from the bandits' rifles, which now and then tore through the fabric and fuselage around him. Only a few hundred feet up, he was an easy mark for even a Nicaraguan sharpshooter.

The necessity for some sort of immediate action to ease his mind drove him to swoop down upon the tangled mass of trees and bushes that screened the guerrillas. Savagely he sprayed them with lead, and was rewarded by the instant cessation of the rifle-fire and a glimpse now and then of a fleeing Sandinista.

But he realized with a grim tightening of his lips, that this, too, was only a momentary victory. As soon as his ammunition was spent the besiegers would return. He had driven them off, all right, but there was no place he could land to take on the two Marines.

He had given the two flyers a respite, however, and he took advantage

of the little time before the bandits would be emboldened to return, to zoom to fifteen hundred feet and survey the country for a possible landing place. He realized the imperative need for immediate action.

It would take very nearly three hours before he could fly back to Managua and bring on a patrol of planes, and he had no idea how much longer Chase and Loud could hold out. And then, too, even a dozen ships could do no more than he. They could bomb hell out of the place, of course, and shoot it up pretty thoroughly with their machine guns, but still they had to have some place to land if they were to pick up their mates.

HE swung around in a wide arc, and his quest seemed hopeless, until he got around to the other side of the mountain. His heart leaped as he saw a broad scar through the vegetation.

From his altitude, it looked like a smooth stretch of rock, where the mountain leveled out for an instant in its descent, like a stair-landing. But he was not deceived by the apparent smoothness of the space; he knew that it was probably a jagged, uneven spur, as safe for a landing as the mouth of a volcano.

He dived, nevertheless, for closer observation, and then all but cheered. For the stretch was more level than he had dared hope. True, it was no ball-room floor, but time and countless tropical storms had worn down the rough spots so that they were wavy rather than ragged. Here and there were sharp points where a harder vein of rock had withstood wear, but with skill and a little luck they could, perhaps, be avoided.

All in all, a landing was not utterly impossible. The thought that worried him was taking off again, should he be successful enough to get the two flyers aboard. The clearing was barely wide enough, but the length, he estimated,

was no more than two hundred and fifty feet. The tiny Corsair would probably make it all right with its normal complement of two, but with three loading her down, he would need a great deal more runway.

"Can't be done," he muttered to himself. "But, damn it all, it's got to be done! And this is the only way I can see. Well, here goes."

Zooming again, he returned to the other side of the mountain. As he glided down he saw that some of the bandits had returned, for again there were puffs of smoke from the jungle and his ears caught a short chattering burst from the machine gun in the cave.

Hutchins swooped down on the trees again, gun spitting. He circled several times, searching out with a stream of lead every possible hiding place and every bit of cover. Then he swept past the cave entrance and waved to the besieged flyers, and climbed for heaven with a roar.

His best plan, he had decided, was to make the Sandinistas believe that he was going for aid. They knew it would take hours for him to make the round trip, and so they would think they had ample time to dispatch the Marines when their gun was stilled.

He climbed to two thousand feet, circled the mountain once more, and then turned in the direction of Managua. Ten minutes later, when he knew he was out of sight, he turned and made for the safe side of El Chipote and the clearing. Approaching it, he cut off his motor and glided, silent save for the whistle of the wind through his wires and struts.

As he neared the ground, he swore softly to himself. It would be next to impossible, he saw, to make any sort of regular landing. The clearing was too short, too narrow and entirely too rough. So he decided to drop the plane, trusting to the special oversize tires, eight inches wide, to take the punishment.

With a jar that almost loosened his teeth, he dropped the ship ten feet, hit and rolled twenty feet and then bounced thirty. His lips moved in semiprofane prayer as the stout little ship hit again, bounded like a tennis ball, landed on its tires, rolled and brought up with a sharp swerve as a wingtip caught on a spur of rock.

"Thank God it wasn't the prop," he breathed, as he swung himself out of the cockpit. The wingtip, he was glad to see, was little damaged. The fabric was slightly torn. But he whistled in dismay as he saw that his tail-skid assembly had been torn away, probably on that first awful bump.

"No good weeping over it," he muttered, "I can take off on the rudder, if my luck holds out. The most important thing is to get those two birds up here."

He would need a rope if he were to carry out his plan, so he hastily and ruthlessly tore apart his parachute, and from its cords he twisted a length that would reach to the cave from the top of the bluff. He coiled it and pulled it over his shoulder, first divesting himself of his heavy flying suit, and set forth toward the cliff.

It took him the better part of an hour to make the mile that separated the clearing from the cave, even though he stoically lashed his way through the matted undergrowth, unmindful of the creepers and thorns that tore at his clothes like clutching fingers.

BREATHING heavily from the exertion, he reached the narrow clearing at the brow of the precipice. But just as he was about to come out of the cover, he thought he heard a movement in the brush at the other end, so he dodged swiftly behind a mass of tangled creeper and waited.

A moment later three Sandinistas came out into the clearing which overlooked his comrades' cave. They moved boldly, with no attempt at con-

cealment, which gladdened Hutchins's heart, for it told him that they had no idea of his landing or of his presence here.

Crossing to a point which Hutchins took to be directly over the mouth of the cave, they laid their rifles on the ground and produced from their shirts and pouches what looked like bundles of candles, tied together.

"Dynamite bombs!" Hutchins swore softly to himself. The Marines in the infantry were only too familiar with these improvised and deadly Sandinist missiles, made of dynamite stolen from the mines and equipped with detonating caps. Some of them were tied up in leather sacks, filled with scrap iron, glass and any other loose hardware that happened to be around, and fitted with fuses for lighting; others were made to explode on contact. The bombs these three had, Hutchins found out later, were of the latter variety.

In a flash, Hutchins saw their intention. If even one of these home-made grenades landed near the entrance to the cave, it would put the two Marines completely out of business. He whipped out his automatic and stealthily started forward.

So engrossed were the three, squatting over their little heap of bombs, that they did not hear Hutchins approach until he was within a dozen feet of them, pistol ready. Then he stepped on a dry twig that snapped like a firecracker.

With a startled cry, the bandits whirled, still crouching. And as they did, Hutchins's pistol barked twice. One of them slid forward on his face without a sound. But the other two had started forward without rising, with the swiftness of tropical snakes. Their rifles were too far from their hands to be of any use, but one of the Sandinistas had drawn a keen-edged machete, and the other was tugging at a revolver in his waistband.

Hutchins's gun flashed again and the

bandit with the gun spun around and crumpled, his hand still on the weapon he had not had time to draw. The remaining Sandinista, realizing the hopelessness of matching a knife against an automatic, suddenly swerved and ran, fear lending speed to his feet. Calmly and coolly, Hutchins took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

But there was no explosion, only a sharp click. His gun had jammed. Frantically he pulled at the recoil slide, tugging with all his strength until the jammed cartridge was ejected. Then he hastily aimed and fired, but the bandit had reached the edge of the clearing and Hutchins had only the briefest sight of his fast-moving target.

He could have sworn though, that the man had wavered in his stride for a split second, as though one of the shots had taken effect. So he ran over to the underbrush that had received the bandit, and his judgment was confirmed by a thin trail of blood. The bandit, however, was no longer in sight.

"That bozo will spread the glad news as soon as he gets down to his pals," muttered Hutchins savagely, returning to the edge of the precipice, "so it's up to us to move fast."

Uncoiling the rope he had improvised from his parachute cords, Hutchins tore a leaf from his pocket notebook and scrawled the following message:

I've got a ship near by. If you birds will send up your machine gun first, I'll cover you while you skin up this rope. You can use these bombs to stave off those buzzards if they try to rush you while I'm hauling up the gun. I took 'em away from some friends of yours who were going to give you a surprise shower.

HUTCHINS.

Handling the crude bombs gingerly, he made a bundle of them with strips torn from his pocket handkerchief, and attached them to the rope end, fastened

the note with a strand, and lowered away very gently, lest the detonating cap of one of the grenades hit the rock too sharply.

When the rope slackened as the bundle rested upon the ground, it hung limp for a few minutes, as he anticipated, while the suspicious flyers looked for any trace of trickery.

Then there came a tug, and a pause of a few moments while they read his message. Meanwhile someone among the bandits noticed the dangling rope. Immediately there was a fusillade directed, however, at the cave, and not at the top of the rock. Evidently the wounded Sandinista had not yet reached the band, and they thought the rope was a ruse of their three comrades who had been dispatched to the top of the rock.

THE rope was vibrating as though it were being tugged or shaken, so Hutchins began hauling up on it. It was weighted, he felt, and he pulled hand over hand, praying that the scraping against the side of the rock would not damage the gun.

He was too busy to pay any attention to the scene below, but he heard yells from the jungle, and a few bullets whistled about him. Hutchins was exposed completely to the Sandinistas' fire, for in his anxiety to pull up the machine gun swiftly and safely, he was on the very edge of the precipice.

Then from below there came a shattering roar, followed by another, and then three more in rapid succession. The two Marines were letting fly with the bombs Hutchins had sent them. From the jungle came yells of pain and surprise, and the firing stopped.

The gun now appeared over the edge. Hastily drawing it onto the rock, Hutchins unknotted the rope and threw it back over, and gave all of his attention to the gun. Loud and Chase had improvised a tripod of saplings as a gunmount, and this they had sent up with the piece.

3 A

A note was wedged into a crevice in the tripod, but Hutchins set up the gun behind a short spur of rock that offered some shelter before he read it. Scrawled on the back of his note was:

Loud's hurt and can't climb. It'll take the two of us to pull him up, so for Pete's sake keep those buzzards away from the cave while I'm climbing. I hate to leave him alone here.

CHASE.

Hutchins looked up and saw the rope tighten into a straight line as Chase began to climb. There was a wild yell as the Sandinistas saw what was happening, and there came a shattering roar as every rifle in the jungle opened up. Lead spattered on the rocks about him, also, he presumed, on the cliff behind the climbing flyer.

Sparing his machine gun ammunition, which was very low, Hutchins began pitching the bombs that were left into that part of the shrubbery from which most of the firing was coming. Aiming carefully, he managed to lay a protective barrage between the cave and the matted undergrowth that approached it. None of the bandits would have the courage to attempt an attack on the remaining Marine while there was a chance of one of those bombs being dropped on him.

Chase's head appeared above the edge of the cliff and Hutchins sprang forward and hauled him over.

"Hurt?" he asked, as he saw a trickle of blood on the side of Chase's face.

"Scratch," replied the other grimly. "Come on, we've got no time for symptoms. We've got to get Loud up here quick—they'll be rushing the place any minute now. Any of those bombs left?"

Hutchins sprang to the gun. "No, I just heaved the last of 'em over. It'll take both of us to pull Loud up, so I'd better work this lead pump for a minute or two, to clear those woods."

He pressed the trigger-grip on the gun. With a clattering like that of a

riveting machine, the piece poured lead into the green mask of the jungle. Carefully, thoroughly, like a gardener spraying a hedge, Hutchins raked every bush, and every tree. Above the chattering of the gun could be heard the shrieks and yells of the Sandinistas as they stopped firing and retreated precipitately.

"Now! Quick!" cried Hutchins as he leaped for the rope. "He's tied himself up by now; let's snake him up here while we have the chance!"

"Don't jerk him any more than we have to," said Chase, as they took up the slack, "he's got a slug through the shoulder, and it's pretty painful."

As gently as they could, when they felt the drag on the rope, they pulled, hand over hand, bracing themselves against the spur that screened the machine gun. About half the rope had been taken in when there were a few scattered shots from below. The Sandinistas had begun to return.

"Up with him!" cried Chase. "It's better to hurt him a little now than let those buzzards fill him full of lead. They'll all be shooting in a minute!"

Swiftly, panting with their exertions, they hauled in. As the additional rifles of the Sandinistas began to open up, they were pulling Loud over the edge of the cliff. Another moment and they had him safely out of range.

"HE'S fainted," said Hutchins, as they carried the limp, silent form to a grassy spot. They laid him on the ground and tore open his blouse. There was a great gash in his left shoulder, and an ugly little hole below it, near the armpit.

"Damn those bloodthirsty swine," muttered Chase, as Hutchins began tying up the wounds with bandage from his first aid kit, "that lower hole is new. Probably got it on the way up here."

"Hurt much, old boy?" Hutchins asked as Loud opened his eyes.

"A little," admitted Loud. "But

I'll be all right in a minute. Just jarred for a moment. A little rest and I'll be able to plug along with you."

"No time," returned Chase. "We've got to move fast, big boy. Those murderin' babies will be up here as fast as they can come. Where's that bus of yours, Hutch?"

"About a mile from here," replied Hutchins. "We'll have to move fast, all right. Let's carry Steve."

"O. K." Chase bent over Loud. "Come on, old boy, put an arm around each of our shoulders, and sit on our joined hands. Think you can hang on?"

"I'm all right," answered Loud, gamely, though his head was drooping. "I'll try to walk, if you'll let me hang on to your shoulders."

But they disregarded his protestations and picked him up bodily as they began the trip back to the plane. Desperation drove them on to negotiate their arduous way successfully through the well-nigh impassable tangle of jungle. Trailing vines tripped them and sharp-spined creepers caught at them with thorny spikes and tore great holes in their clothes, as they forced their way through by main strength.

Loud's head suddenly sagged forward as he fainted from the pain of their jolting passage through the brush, and they felt his dead weight sag on their joined hands.

They had covered, perhaps, half the distance when they had to stop to ease the agony of their aching arms and backs, and of their straining, burning lungs. No breath had been wasted in conversation and they stood silent now, drawing in air to their tortured lungs. Suddenly Hutchins stiffened into attention.

"Listen," he said. "Do you hear anything, Bud?"

Every sense keen and alert they stood, listening intently. From far behind them came a crashing through the forest; faint shouts and cries as the

savage pursuers found traces of their passage in trampled underbrush and bits of khaki cloth torn off by the thorns.

"We've got to move faster," warned Hutchins. "They'll cover this ground in better time than we made. We're even breaking trail for them."

Picking up the unconscious Loud, they redoubled their efforts, throwing themselves against what seemed to be impassable brush. Sweat formed in glistening drops on their foreheads and trickled down their faces, making white rivulets through the dirt and grime and powder stains.

Their breath came in harsh, sobbing gasps, and the weight of their burden seemed to increase with every step they took. Every muscle and every nerve screamed for rest, and they seemed to move with leaden slowness. But still they forged ahead, lips compressed into grim lines, refusing to admit the possibility of failure, driven on by an indefatigable spirit of determination to get their wounded comrade to safety.

The sounds of pursuit behind them grew louder, much louder as they neared their goal. A great fear began to grow in Hutchins's mind, which Chase voiced a moment later.

"Is—it—much further?" he gasped. "We—got to—keep—some lead—get your motor started."

"No. Little way." Hutchins, too, economized on breath. "Just—'nother—spurt."

And then, just when it seemed that they had reached the limit of human endurance, they burst out of the underbrush and into the clearing where the ship stood waiting. It looked to them as would a vision of Paradise to a Mohammedan.

THE cries in the jungle behind them were now so loud that they could distinguish now and then a word screamed out by one of their pursuers, as they ran across the space,

new hope lending superhuman strength to their legs.

"Quick!" gasped Chase. "Dump—Loud—cockpit. Got to—turn her."

Hastily they stowed Loud into the cockpit. The plane was at the further end of the clearing, where she had rolled when Hutchins landed. Savagely they heaved at the wings and with their last ounce of strength managed to turn the plane around. Too far gone for words, Hutchins silently thanked his lucky stars that there was a wind, and that it had veered into the right direction. A few scattered shots from the jungle told them that they had been sighted.

"Get in!" screamed Chase, "I'll spin the prop!"

Hutchins scrambled into the pilot's seat as Chase twisted the propeller. With a deafening roar the powerful motor leaped to life, just as the first of the Sandinistas ran out into the clearing.

"Give her the gun!" shouted Chase, above the noise of the motor, as he swung himself in beside Loud. The foremost of the bandits dropped to one knee to steady their aim.

The motor's song rose to a crescendo as Hutchins opened her up. With a jerk, the ship catapulted forward, roaring over the rocky ledge. There was a terrific shock as she hit a ridge, bounced and hit the rock again—but on both wheels and gathering speed.

"Oh, Lord, will she make it, overloaded and with this tiny runway?" Hutchins muttered to himself.

They were almost at the end of the rocky spur when he pulled the stick back, just as the plane hit another outcropping of jagged rock. With another nerve-shattering jar, she bounced—and remained afloat.

For a moment the motor pulled the plane up almost like a helicopter, but in the absence of a tail-skid, the rudder had given slightly, throwing the ship off balance, and suddenly they side-slipped—and directly ahead of them was the

edge of the clearing a solid wall of scrub trees.

Desperately, using every bit of his skill, Hutchins pulled her out of the side-slip. But as he jerked the stick back again, she hit the tree-tops with her undercarriage. There was a rending, splintering shock, and then a sickening plunge forward. Hutchins closed his eyes, but hung onto the stick. It was all over now, he decided, and braced himself for the fall.

And then suddenly, as though fate had relented and released the plane from the eager clutches of the jungle, the stout little ship steadied and again floated. Vibrating from nose to tail with the pull of its powerful motor against the inertia following the crash, she slowly pulled ahead, steady-ing as she picked up speed. In a moment, she was zooming in a long climb, safe at last.

The whole desperate, hair-raising business had taken only a few minutes, but it seemed like years to Hutchins. He essayed a grin as he turned to Chase, who in turn twisted his taut, bloodless lips into a weird smile that made him look as though he were wearing a grotesque mask. Loud was unconscious and knew nothing of their flirtation with the Grim Reaper.

Hutchins circled and both he and Chase looked down over the side. Far below, they could see the Sandinistas gathered in the clearing, a spurt of smoke now and then bespeaking their futile attempts to wing the plane.

Suddenly Chase gripped Hutchins's arm and pointed downward.

"Look!" he shouted. "Is that our landing gear? That's what that shock was when we cleared those trees."

Hutchins dived hoping that Chase was wrong. As they neared the clearing, they both stared and then Chase recklessly hung overside. His face was again grim as he pulled himself back into the cockpit.

"Right," he yelled, his hands cupped at Hutchins's ear. "Those are our

wheels. How the hell are we going to land? Our 'chutes were burned in our bus, and you tore yours up to make that rope."

Hutchins shrugged and turned his head. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he shouted. "Right now we're better off than we were. We'll figure some way out."

THERE was no further exchange of words until they reached Managua, almost an hour later. Loud had not yet come to, and they were both too tired, too anxious for speech. But now, as the flying field appeared beneath, Hutchins turned and shouted at Chase.

"I'm going to bank and try to land on a wingtip. It's our only chance. I hate to wreck the ship, but it's got to be done."

Chase nodded and leaned forward. "I'll pray," he announced at the top of his voice, with a grin that was belied by his white face.

Apparently as calm and cool as though he were about to make an ordinary three point landing, Hutchins brought the plane into a long glide. But when the earth was a scant twenty feet below, he banked sharply and then leveled off, and dropped the ship considerably slowed.

Then Hutchins clenched his teeth. He noted that Chase's knuckles were showing white through his skin as he gripped the side of the cockpit. Loud was still unconscious, blissfully ignorant of the chance they were taking. With a muttered prayer, Hutchins swung the stick sharply.

The left wing of the plane dipped suddenly and dragged for a second with a ripping, splintering noise. Then the ship swung sharply around. There was a crash and the sound of shattering wood. Too late, Hutchins saw that the worst was going to happen. She was going to turn over. With the sudden spinning whirl, Hutchins was thrown forward. His head hit the in-

strument board and blackness blotted out the whole scene.

He came to, a little while later, in the emergency room, and sat up, feeling his bandaged, aching head. A moment's inventory told him that he was otherwise uninjured, except for a thoroughly bruised body. The doctor came over.

"Feel all right?" he asked.

"Sure. How're Chase and Loud?"

"Loud's pretty badly bunged up, but he'll pull through. Chase was knocked out too, when you turned over, but otherwise he's O. K. They're both over in the General Hospital. You'd better get a little more rest now.

"What time is it?" Hutchins demanded.

"A little after seven. Just try to sleep a little longer."

"Sleep, hell! Got a date for dinner."

DuBois and Stahlberg were already

seated at table when Hutchins joined them.

"Hello!" said Stahlberg, as he saw the bandage on Hutchins's head and noted his limp. "Been wounded?"

"Hell, no," grinned the flyer. "Bumped my bean against the cowl."

"Anything exciting to report about your trip?" demanded DuBois.

"Nothing much." Hutchins dropped into his seat and picked up a menu card. "Just had to pick up a couple of fellows who crashed on El Chipote, near our old friend Sandino."

"You see?" said DuBois, turning to Stahlberg. "You've been expecting a thrilling war story, haven't you? Well, there you are. Just a routine flying job—picking up a couple of flyers who smashed up another plane that the taxpayers will foot the bill for. This whole business is just what I said it was this morning—just a 'bamboo war.' Let's eat."

THE END.



The Pitch Lake of Trinidad

NEAR the center of the West Indian island of Trinidad is situated one of the world's greatest natural wonders, the Pitch Lake, which is the main source of asphalt supply for the making of highways. It is not, strictly speaking, a lake, but a swamp, desolate and somber, almost devoid of vegetation and bird life. Its surface resembles the wrinkled skin of an aged elephant.

So firm is the edge that a man can stand upon it without leaving his footmark in the pitch, but toward the center it softens, and in places is of liquid consistency. Its use was discovered by Sir Walter Raleigh, who visited Trinidad in 1595. He calked the seams of his ship, the *Golden Hind*, with some of the pitch, and reported that he had left behind enough to supply all the world's navies.

In 1901 the deposit, which is estimated at four million tons, was first dug out for commercial purposes. As the huge chunks are removed from the swamp, the liquid pitch slowly oozes up and fills the gaps.

This gray area has unnamable terrors for the negro natives. They tell how the lake was once a prosperous village bright with flowers and bird songs. It was swallowed up by the lake, at the command of the Great Jumbie, because the residents killed the humming birds, to obtain their plumage for feathering arrows.

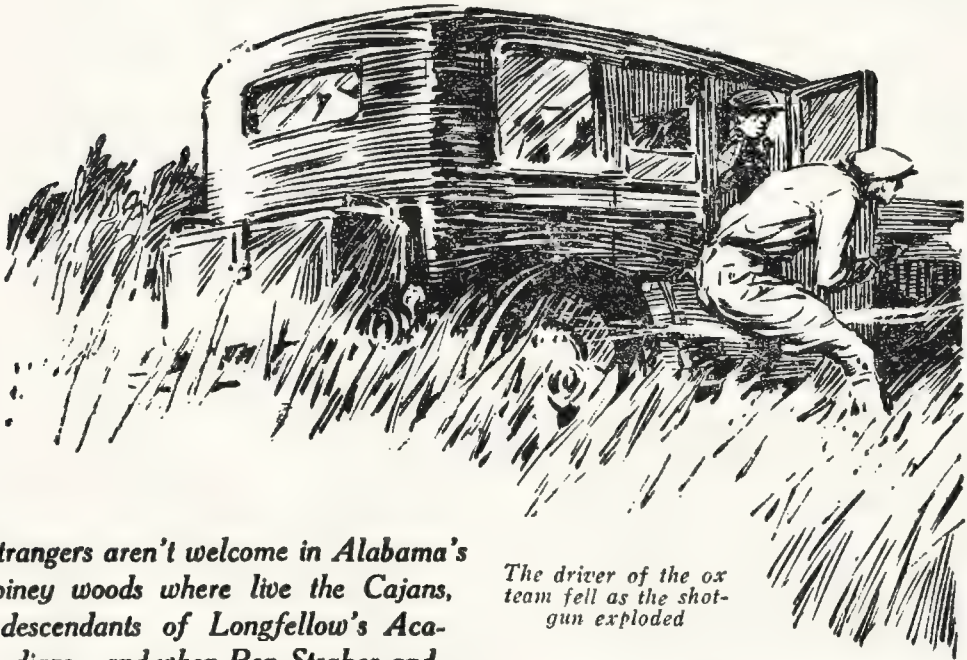
As if to emphasize the otherwise complete desolation of this region, on the very edge of the swamp flourishes a wonderful tropical lily, sole vestige of the once luxuriant vegetation which, according to the tale, once grew upon the site of the Pitch Lake of Trinidad.

C. A. F. Macbeth.

Big Casino

By **ANTHONY M. RUD**

Author of "The Albino Ogre," etc.



Strangers aren't welcome in Alabama's piney woods where live the Cajans, descendants of Longfellow's Acadians—and when Ben Straker and his buddy, Jack Sennett, went into Cajanland, they knew they were hunting trouble as well as treasure

The driver of the ox team fell as the shotgun exploded

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

THE EIGHTY-NINTH WHITE CHIP.

QUEER old Zeke Straker had been on hand, making himself thoroughly comfortable and objectionable, both of the other times Ben Straker had driven up to his woods retreat with Sunday features to write. Zeke had a key to Ben's stout cabin. He mixed Ben's odorous perique with his own flaky alfalfa-tobacco, and puffed continuously on a stubby brier

till the place smelled like a tannery after a disastrous fire.

Zeke never opened a window. He rarely washed a dish. But he did take the most meticulous care of Ben's shotguns and rifle, kept in their leather cases in a wall cabinet.

Zeke handled any sort of firearm with critical appreciation. He subsisted almost entirely on salt and the flesh of game, of which there is an abundance in Alabama's piney woods—and that probably was the reason he cleaned and oiled the expensive guns so carefully. More than likely the diet also had something to do with the strange incurable malady which now was twisting his withered limbs, bending him forward at the shoulders and neck.

Big Ben Straker tolerated Zeke, his only known living relative—he even

liked the old codger in off-handed fashion. Of course, on occasion Ben cussed him out heartily, for there never was a newspaper man who liked to wash a four-day accumulation of greasy dishes, or see a full pound tin of his own particular tobacco left as nothing but a permanent blue haze inside his cabin.

But Ben Straker had a sparkle of deep good humor in his hazel eyes, a

torical material, crept into one of the old man's reminiscences. The bargain was not entirely one-sided, tacit though it was.



sidewise twist to a mouth which could grow grim and wolfish—but almost never did. Two hundred pounds of bone, muscle and easy-going generosity; enough over six feet so he could lean back and clamp his knees around a tip-up typewriter as he wrote and puffed—four cigarettes and twelve hundred words of first draft copy, every hour.

That is, every hour he worked. When Zeke was around—that infamous old liar—there usually wasn't much work done. Ben, down in his heart, pitied his crippled pauper grand-uncle, though no casual listener could have suspected the fact. Ben listened to Zeke's tall yarns of Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, Mexico; sometimes even made a few notes. He never had dared to tell one of the stories in the lurid fashion of old Zeke; but now and again some usable bit of color, or what sounded like novel and genuine his-

This time, returning from an eight-day trammel-netting trip out of Gulfport, through Pass Christian and Pass Mary Ann down toward Fifer Key and the Mississippi Delta, Ben Straker entered his cabin, feeling a distinct sense of disappointment that old Zeke was not in evidence.

Everything was in perfect order, the blankets rolled and tied in tarps, the floor dusty, but otherwise spotless, firewood for the hearth still piled as precaution against a hasty visit. No, Zeke had not been here during the past month. That was plain.

Ben Straker brought in his stores, purchased in Mobile. He arranged the typewriter to suit. He climbed out of this posture, built a fire. He dug out the two bottles of champagne and the quart of rye whisky which had filled his musette bag. No use to cool the wine. Disconsolately he pulled the cork of the rye, and half filled a glass with the potent fluid. He really missed old Zeke. Oh, hell; there was that

series of seven articles for the *Register* and the syndicate—probably a good thing Zeke hadn't showed up. Ben hoped the old hellion hadn't checked out, however. Zeke hadn't looked any too well.

Two or three swallows of the rye whisky, and Ben was bearing down on the keys of his portable Chatterbox at twelve hundred words an hour.

THE bent little man walked unsteadily. He paused twice on the last hundred feet of the woods path. Once he put out a groping hand to steady himself against the trunk of a holly tree. He missed the bole of the tree, and fell over into the thick meshes of an anise bush.

A dry sound came from his throat, a sort of inarticulate curse. He got to his feet with difficulty. When he walked forward again he swayed, staggered, and almost fell a second time. He was bowed from the shoulders and neck, and it seemed that his right arm and left leg were twisted queerly. Even more queerly than usual.

Zeke Straker had come—a little late, for good and obvious reasons. Three No. 2 buckshot had embedded themselves in his right shoulder. One had penetrated his right lung. While that shoulder was tightly bandaged, the wound had oozed much of his scanty blood. He was dizzy. Red foam oozed to his lips.

Still, when he leaned against the cabin wall, hearing within the *clackety-clackety-clack-ker-thump* of a typewriter going full speed, the old man managed to pull himself together. He opened the door left-handedly and crossed the threshold; closed the door.

Ben Straker's back was turned, and he was absorbed in the details of harpooning and capturing a fourteen-hundred-pound devilfish off Gulfport; whanging out copy which seemed lurid and exciting to him, but over which a couple or three editors later would yawn—then purchase, chiefly for the

sake of the excellent glossy four by five Graflex prints which accompanied the script.

Ben, as a Sunday feature writer, was an A-1 photographer. He had been a flop as a reporter; and as a feature writer, he sleuthed out tales worthy of a Hergesheimer at his colorful best, but told them in the careful, uninspired style of a Taussig delineating the point of diminishing returns, or a Holt describing the causes of rickets in children. If he remained unstirred for life, some pretty and prosaic female was due to annex a strong but rather unexciting husband, one who could sail in the moonlight on Mobile Bay, and see little besides the silt brought down by the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers.

Though Zeke never had said a word about it, Zeke Straker's purpose in life—for two years, at least—had been to stir his lumbering, good-natured ox of a grand-nephew into a fever which would give him a chance at genius. Of course, Zeke had gone at the problem in the back-heeled fashion learned by intrigue in Mexico. But now it looked as though the last spur rowel would not have a chance to dig into the thick hide of Ben Straker.

Zeke knew he was dying. He tiptoed forward unsteadily—but clasped his left hand about the uncorked bottle of rye. Then he sank down on the cot, tipping the bottle to his bluing lips and drinking deeply. For what he wanted to do, even hundred-proof whisky might not be enough. He wished that there had been some champagne; lots of it. Zeke rarely drank distilled liquor. Champagne, though, gave a lift to old bones; that is, if one drank enough of it. Usually Ben brought some—ah, there! On the shelf were two bottles!

Zeke tried to rise. At that second came a brief pause in the clatter of typewriting. The springs of the cot squeaked. He slumped back.

"What the hell!" cried Ben, startled. He leaped up. "Oh, it's you, Zeke,"

with less interest. "I was wondering whether your private spy service at Citronelle wouldn't let you know I was coming up again."

Clackety-clackety-clack!

"Spy service!" muttered the old man with peculiar irony, grinning under his stubble of beard. "Would you do me a favor, Ben?"

"Oh, sure, Zeke," returned the youth, irritation and good nature mingling inextricably. "Here's ten—a third of what I've got left." He reached for the wallet on his hip.

"Not that, boy. Not this time—and never again!" The voice of old Zeke was clear, but curiously weary. His black eyes, however, held steady. Ben was surprised, but understood that his old pauper relative really meant what he said, for some reason unexplained.

"Take another drink of the rye," bade Ben. "I'll drop those two bottles of fizz in the well bucket—cool 'em off. But whatinell was it you wanted? You didn't say." He eyed Zeke curiously, sensing a different timbre in the oldster's voice. When the latter waved away the suggestion of wine for the time being, Ben really straightened up and began to take notice. It simply was not natural.

THE old man fumbled at his belt, coming up with a flat, buckled pouch which had lain against his thigh beneath the overalls. He did not mention it right away, however.

"Did you ever hear tell of the Denison gang?" he asked with apparent irrelevance.

Ben slumped back, feeling premonitions of a yawn. This was old stuff to him. "Sure. You've yarned to me plenty about 'em—fairy tales," he grinned. "Those old woods bandits who held up planters on the Cotton Road."

"Yes, and who found some of the gold of Lafitte, and who smuggled in them Mex rubies and dope and such in

pecan shells," acceded Zeke grimly. He breathed unevenly. The hand which raised the bottle to his lips now was shaking as with the palsy.

"Nemmind, I ain't botherin' you with 'em—they'll likely tend to that!" he gulped with cryptic emphasis. "You didn't scribble them stories; thought 'em too wild, eh? All right. Nemmind." He smiled thinly. "Mebbe I've lied to you some; most of us old fools can't remember straight, anyway. The years seem to twist things some. I jest want to tell you—tell you—" For a second he choked, rubbing the arm of his flannel shirt against his lips. A red smear showed; but he was careful that Ben did not see.

"A-ah. I ain't much good no more," he breathed weakly. "Got to talk fast, I reckon."

Ben had got to his feet, frowning in quick alarm; but Zeke waved him back. "No use, Ben," he said. "I always said I'd live to a hunderd, raising the prophet thirty. But I reckon the game's table stakes—and I only got one white chip left to call. I jest want to say three—three things. First, there still is Denisons—I got some mighty sore reasons to know it!"

"Denisons!" exclaimed Ben. "Why, I thought they'd all been hanged years back. They—"

"Second," said Zeke, ignoring the interruption, "there once was a Straker in their gang—nemmind his name. They'd robbed and ruined his whole family, killing three of them—his kid sister was one. He'd been away some years—up with the damn-yanks in Ohio. When he come back the woods folks didn't know him. He joined up—and that's why eight Denisons was hanged at Laurel Ridge, two-three years later— You never heard much about it, 'cause your pappy and mammy died short after you was born. But that's the way it was." Zeke paused to swallow whisky and gulp for breath.

"But good Lord!" protested Ben impatiently, yet with a peculiar feeling

that this infamous old liar was not lying now. What was the reason? And if the tale he told was true—

Zeke's eyes looked as though they were glazing—probably too much rye on an empty stomach, Ben surmised.

"Third—an' las'—" muttered Zeke. Then he seemed to call upon some final reserve of strength. "You see this-hyar pouch? Well, don't let nobody take it away. When the time comes—when the time comes—"

"Say, what the hell's the matter with you, anyway, Zeke?" cried Ben. His hard-boiled reportorial shell had been thoroughly cracked now, and he was leaning forward, real concern in his eyes.

"Nothin'—nothin'—jes' dyin', boy. Fella's gotta right to get drunk when he's dyin', ain't he? 'Third an' las'—" Zeke tipped up the bottle for the sixth, not the third time. Of course, that was not what he had meant. "Third an' las': This pouch here b'longs to you! You do wassitsaysh—wassitsaysh—no 'maginashun. Damn shamed a Shtraker—no 'maginashun—"

The sentence died out in a gurgling chuckle. Before the shocked and unbelieving eyes of his grand-nephew, hard-living and life loving Ezekiel Straker pitched forward to the floor, dead—chuckling derisively for a show-down with his last, his eighty-ninth white chip!

CHAPTER II.

A GRIN FROM THE GRAVE.

ELEVEN days later a very much sobered Ben Straker was officially released from the status of "material witness" in the murder case, by the coroner's jury and high sheriff of Mobile County, Alabama.

The killing of Zeke Straker probably would remain for all time a mystery of the deep woods. There had been little real interest in his case. Zeke himself had been a notorious pan-

handler and vagabond, presumably possessing no more than the rough clothes in which he was buried. On the other hand the big, good-natured Ben was known and liked by every newspaper man and petty official along this sector of the Gulf Coast. In spite of unfavorable appearances, the result was a foregone conclusion. They took his evidence, such as it was, and called the killing an accident.

Of course, Ben had not told all he knew. He reserved that for ears other than those of the Greek politicians just then in power in Mobile.

Ben sent a weirdly worded message to Jack Sennett, a minor editor on the New Orleans *Item*—and paid the higher rate demanded for cipher messages. Then, shame-faced and well-nigh halting of step, he walked out on Government Street, past Concepcion, to one of those iron galleried homes that look down on the stubby palms.

He cooled his heels for fully twenty minutes after giving his name. Then a pert French Creole maid returned, putting all her strength into opening the iron-studded doors.

"Mam'selle she not to home—an' nevaire weel *be* to home—to you!" said the maid, unconsciously stamping her slippered foot. But then she looked a little sidewise, coquettishly out of her dark, beaded lashes. This big American, scorned by a foolish mistress, might be induced to cast ardent glances elsewhere—and he was "beeg, beeg an' str-rong!" Pretty Annette liked men of this sort; and she was not too proud to love one, even if he had been nearly two weeks in jail. What did that matter, now he was free an' could take her to de movee. Mon-ee? She had some. He could make more. She, being French Creole, could take care of every copper cent to best advantage. But monsieur?

Monsieur did not even see her. He turned away with a brusque exclamation—and a feeling that bullets never could be as bad medicine for the heart

as this. So Adele Denton had given him the gate. Blond and lovely Adele. Well, she would. There was nothing in the code of the South which gave social room to an indigent reporter half convicted of homicide—or whatever the term might be. When they heard what was going to happen now, they'd suspect him even more.

"Murderer! *Canaille!*" spat Annette, in disappointment and self-disgust, making a face at his broad, retreating back.

She slammed the door. "Damn-fool, you *femme* upstairs!" And she thumbed her nose in a gesture intended to pierce the ceiling. In her own fashion the pert Annette secretly preferred murderers and *canaille*—they made love fast, like real men.

JACK SENNETT got off the L & N train, stretching and yawning luxuriously. He had slept almost all the superheated way from New Orleans, and now needed only a second daily bath and a once-over with a needle for new red bugs*, to be ready for anything. He might not even demand that attention, provided something really interesting was put up to him.

It was. A few minutes later he was met by Ben Straker. The two clasped hands—the slender Jack Sennett, who had not returned to Texas, for good reason, and the burly big Ben Straker who just two days before had been discussed by a coroner's jury in respect to a killing—possibly a murder.

"It was murder, Jack, old man," assured Ben quietly, when once the preliminaries of greeting and joshing had been performed over a pair of the famous Aristide's silver fizzes, and a shrimp luncheon at Morrison's was under their belts.

The blue eyes of Jack Sennett were glistening. Younger by two years than his friend and war comrade, he

possessed a reckless dash of pepper in the sauce of his Texas spirit. That recklessness—and a girl—and another man whose rights had been prior; those were the reasons why the short grass country of the Panhandle nevermore would hear the *zing-g* of his wire stretcher, and bawling white faces never again would listen to his resonant barytone.

Jack Sennett had been doing special work for the *Item* for some time. Privately he had shrugged in momentary regret over chucking his job at the call of his friend—a pretty good job, too, as these places were rated in southern journalism—but now his wide mouth, and even his wavy, uncombable yellow hair, seemed to smile.

"I brought four-sixty," Jack grinned. "That's all I can put up, 'cept my fists and a skimpy sort of outfit. But it's all yours if you want it, Ben! What's the lay? You said murder, and I reckon that's right—but just plain murder ain't exciting to me, for I've been up to Mer Rouge! Are we goin' after a big scoop somewhere?"

Ben nodded slowly. "Come on up to the room. I've got something to show you. Jack, it's because I knew you'd take a chance with me that I called you.

"This is fifty-fifty from go to finish—if you want to come. It may be something really big, or it may prove a complete washout. In any event, there's plenty trouble—perhaps some shooting."

"Bring it on!" grinned Jack Sennett, slipping his arm under the knotted biceps of his friend, and fairly waltzing out of the cafeteria. "They call me rough an' tough an' wild, but I never harmed a chicken or a child!—Shakespeare."

Back at the Hotel Bienville, in a small room overlooking the square of that name, Ben wasted no time. He

*Or chiggers.

placed before Jack a handwritten letter:

DEAR GRAND-NEPHEW BEN.

When you get this I'll be dead. Either the Denisons, or this damned arthritis, will get me down. If its the sickness, huh! I got a whole pound of marijuana, I can smoke like a chimbley—an my heart ain't strong any more.

Don't worry none about me. I'm leavin you every damn thing I got an mebbe you'll be some surprised. The ol fool you been handin money to an treatin decent mebbe wasn't such a liar like you thought!

Figurin rough, theres nigh onto eight hundred thousand cached. I never cared a hoot in hell about jack or cloes or nothin since Lissy died. But I got one hell of a kick outa the fives an tens you past to me when you thought I was stony broke, an you yourself was really down to cases!

I aim to make it up to you, Ben. But this'll be the big yarn. You aint a good writter—so far you aint. All you know is facks, an everybody knows them or can look em up. What you reely need is a spur stuck into your maginashun. Well, here is what I aim to make a spur. How does 800,000\$ sound. It's yours if you find it. And then I'm leavin you some ground up nigh Cheney. Anyhow thats yours. Its worth mebbe sixty grand. So even if you aint got the maginashun to find what I left, I'm payin you back with some intrust.

When you get up there, find an ormolu clock an take it to pieces.

Look out for guys who used to be calt Denison.

Don't have no truck with lawyers.

An use your maginashun!

Heres liftin a brimstone cocktail to you, probly in hell! Come on down an drink with me again, some day!

EZEKIEL ETIENNE STRAKER.

"That's part of it, Jack," said Ben Straker. "I've told you about his death—Zeke, I mean, of course. Well, here's the rest of it. As you see," he spread the second paper, "it's a gift deed to a certain property up past Citronelle, a place that once was a famous hangout for thieves of the Cotton Road—and which my esteemed grand-uncle seems to have been able

to give away in fee simple! He did it awhile back, so it's legal, anyhow. I didn't know he had a cent."

"Some birds have been known to sell Brooklyn Bridge to country customers," offered Jack. "Sure old Zeke wasn't plain cuckoo? I'm not tryin' to throw any dirt on your uncle, o' course, but sometimes when guys get old and sick, they start imagining things."

BEN shook his head slowly. He reached inside his pocket and brought out the pouch, gift from Zeke—a bit of evidence he had not exhibited at the inquest. One which had given him the greatest shock he had experienced in a lifetime.

He took from it three objects, each one tied up in a strip of bandanna handkerchief.

After one level glance, Jack unknotted the cloths. There in his palm lay three objects. One was a heavy solid gold coin, unmilled, and stamped in the roughest fashion. The other two were large-sized Schley pecans—the meaty, paper-shell variety. One of these seemed heavy—heavier than any nut should be. The other was light.

Jack's blue eyes had widened at sight of the coin; but his newspaper training kept him skeptical.

"Int'restin'—if true," he said, simulating a yawn, and flipping the ancient goldpiece into the air, catching it. "What's the idea of the nuts?"

"Crack them!" bade Ben Straker. "Do it carefully."

Obediently Jack took one between the heels of his palms. A crackling ensued under the pressure applied. He looked down wonderingly at his hands. There, amid the ruins of the thin shell, was a pile of fine white powder.

"Sniff it—but be damn careful!" warned Ben.

Jack nodded, bent his head. Then of a sudden he straightened, a bewildered expression rapidly changing to cynical amusement on his face.

"Coke!" he gasped, shaking his

curly head like a prize fighter who has taken a stiff one on the chin.

"Yep," said Ben. "The Denison gang's handiwork, I reckon. Now crack the other."

"Wa-al, if it's more dope—" protested Jack, a dubious note in his voice. He still was shaking his head, trying to rid it of the influence of the unfamiliar drug.

"It isn't."

So it was that the second nut was cracked, albeit with more difficulty, as the shell fitted snugly about a round, hard object. Disbelieving the evidence of his eyes, Jack Sennett stared down at the hard object, about the size of a small hazelnut, which lay in his palm. It was an uncut Burmese ruby! Even he could guess, from the liquid crimson of its fire.

"I sold one just like that," said Ben Straker in a sober tone. "C'mere—look out the window—down there—yeah, I mean that roadster, all piled up with musettes and telescope bags?"

"Uh-huh, what of it?"

"That," said Ben, "represents the other ruby! It's our outfit."

A slow grin came to the mouth of Jack Sennett. "Cracked down!" he said. "I think I'm going to *like* this crazy uncle of yours, Ben—but while I'm decidin', d'you s'pose we could hock this red sparkler for a couple more silver fizzes?"

In response to the room service request over the phone—one given in a code known to all newspaper men and traveling salesmen in the South—a waiter arrived, bearing a tray, a tall shaker, and two generous glasses. A silver fizz, according to the recipe of Aristide, the Greek genius of Mobile, is more than a drink; it is a ceremony. Though Aristide himself long since has gone to that far Elysian shore where the nectar of Crete and Falernia is unhampered by nuisances like laws, his handiwork lingers on. Even the best of men may forget the genuine silver fizz of Aristide—but those men

will be dead then, and may sip later and better concoctions of the old master. Who knows?

Jack Sennett grinned at sight of the shaker. Ben Straker lolled back, unheeding, and rolled a Bull Durham cigarette in wheat straw. For that reason—Ben's big fingers were none too clever at handling a pill, in spite of his reportorial experience—Ben did not look closely at the waiter. And he did not see something far more remarkable, for just that reason.

After one careless glance at the waiter, the features of easy-going Jack Sennett lost their grin. His yellow-brown brows drew close. He frowned—and looked searchingly.

"Ben!" he whispered. "Ben!" And reached over, tapping his comrade on the knee.

THAT instant the waiter threw aside his rôle. Perhaps he recognized the ex-reporter, Jack Sennett—a man who had been on his trail ever since the famous murders at Mer Rouge—or it may have been that this was just the time he had planned for his coup.

He stopped shaking, the metal container above his head. Then, with a gritted expletive, he flung the whole thing straight at Jack Sennett!

Jack dodged. The shaker of liquid hit the back of his chair and spilled frothily.

That same second the pseudo waiter reached past his dickey and yanked out a snub-nosed automatic pistol.

"You gimme—!" he snarled.

That was as far as he got. Coolly, quite in the same fashion he once had doubled a rubber boot about a whipping live wire broken from the Cartridge Street trolley, Jack Sennett reached down. There was a little, cheap rug on the floor. He gave it a yank.

That same instant Ben Straker hit the gunman with a flying tackle which did not count the effect of guns.

"Well, now, s'pose you lay off, Ben," said Jack Sennett in a casual tone, perhaps twenty seconds later. "The bird's dead. Or if he ain't, I'd sure like to ask him some questions—then make him shake up another fizz like the one he spoiled."

"Fizz?" panted Ben Straker, releasing his hold. "What the hell d'you mean, Jack?"

"Nothin' much," grinned the man who had just come from Louisiana. "On'y I reckon your grand-unk wasn't altogether cuckoo. Up Mer Rouge way I heard a lot of times that the worst of the killers had been brought in from over here in Alabama; that they were the remnants of a famous old gang called Denisons. And this chap here"—Jack Sennett jerked a thumb toward their captive—"was the leader of a bunch that held up and killed that news photographer who'd managed to get some pictures they didn't want printed. Wait till this bird wakes up, and you'll see. Meanwhile tie him up somehow. I'm going to call your hotel manager and the chief of police."

Before the latter two appeared, the captive aroused, glowering and cursing. Even Jack Sennett's sharpest questions failed to elicit any information, however, except one grated threat:

"They'se othehs 'll fix yo'-all, an' fix yo' right, fo' doin' this!"

When a sergeant and two policemen reached the room, trailed by a very badly worried hotel manager, it was established quickly that the prisoner was an escaped convict, badly wanted in Alabama—and more than likely he was the murderer of the photographer mentioned by Jack Sennett.

There were some small rewards; but at the moment these did not interest either of the newspaper men. With the anxious coöperation of the manager, they succeeded in persuading the police sergeant to take entire credit for the capture. The killer was smug-

gled down a back stairway and into a police car.

When the two were alone, Jack turned, grinning, to Ben Straker. Jack was flipping up a silver dollar.

"We now have two solemn duties," he said.

Ben regarded him expectantly, but said nothing.

"Hell, you're no newspaper man—no 'maginashun'!" snorted Jack. "I'm goin' to flip this here coin, an' you're goin' to call it. The loser goes out an' buys a good tall drink to keep us warm while we shoot up north in your bus. An' the winner—he phones a scoop story on the capture of Tom Bludsoe to *his* paper!"

Ben smiled slowly, nodded. "Heads!" he called. The coin spun. Heads it was, as it fell to the carpet.

"Lucky louse!" shrugged Jack. "You win. Me, I'm goin' to make Aristide put twice as much silver as fizz in them drinks!"

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE CASINO.

IT is a strange country, this land of piney woods which lies between Citronelle and Cheney. It is Cajanland. When Longfellow wrote his poem concerning a heroine called *Evangeline*, he knew the whole story of how these Acadians were exiled from their homeland in Nova Scotia—but very little about what happened to them thereafter.

To-day there are fully ten thousand white Cajans in the piney woods of Alabama, and more in Mississippi. They have no schools, almost no churches; they simply exist. Somehow they exist. Corn and cabbage, hogs and hominy—occasionally a deer, a wild turkey or a greasy 'possum. Sugar cane. "Shinny"—the poisonous moonshine whisky made from corn, lye, and the scum of cane boilings.

They have no truck with strangers. "Whah yo'-all boun'?" queried the easy-going genial nigger who refilled their gas and oil tanks at Citronelle. His was the mere gossipy curiosity of his kind.

"Oh, up a couple three-quarters—toward Cheney," rejoined Ben carelessly, not even looking around. Really he meant five or six miles.

He felt a tightening pressure on his arm. With an almost imperceptible nod Jack was drawing his attention toward the negro.

"Lawdy, boss!" gasped the colored man, fingering the dime tip, not even looking at it. "Go th'oo t' Cheney! Don't stop nowheahs!"

"H-m," said Ben, unimpressed. "You talk to him, Jack. He might know something, though it isn't likely. I'm going to get a couple pipes and cans of tobac; these makin's 'll soon be all mildewed and too damp to burn." With that he was out of the machine and heading toward Hester's Grocery and General Store.

"D'you know," he said in a peculiar tone, when again he was seated at the wheel, going northward in second speed through the deepening sand, "there were a couple of our old Rainbow Division buddies there in that shop?"

"Yeah?" Jack Sennett had shut up like a clam, not offering even to say what he had been told by the filling station negro. Ben had not seen that his comrade had eased out an auto pistol, thrusting it into his flannel shirt just above the belt. Jack also opened both the windshield and the sedan window on his right.

"Uh-huh." For a moment Ben Straker frowned at the deep ruts of the road ahead, using his powerful arms to keep the car from stalling. "Yeah. Both Joe and Sam Hester were there. I told 'em we were stocking up, planning to live a while—uh—uh—" Jolts almost hard enough to break springs interrupted his sentence.

He got back into the ruts with a shuddering of the stanch car's differential.

"What then?" drawled Jack Sennett, seeming to have grown sleepier—though exactly the reverse was the case.

"When they heard what I said, both Sam and Joe reached into their pockets—uh—and gave me these!"

Snatching a second's leeway, Big Ben Straker reached into a side pocket of his hunting jacket and tossed over a pair of rabbit's feet.

"They said I'd need all their luck. What the hell do you know about that!"

"Wa-al—" Jack Sennett stretched, hooking the heel of his right shoe out of the car window on his side. "Huh, seems to me, Ben, I'd inquiah—" His voice had assumed the whole drawl of southern Texas. Deceptively enough, he seemed about to snore.

"Inquire what?"

"Hell, I'd go back an' ask them two goddam rabbits what sorta good luck eight o' them feet brought to them!"

No fault of the gallant roadster; but they stalled twice in the next mile. Here the ruts had widened, were broad gauge for ox carts. Once upon a time Henry Ford had made cars to fit the ox cart ruts, but probably even the indomitable Henry had given up in this sector, where even the Model T was an inconceivable luxury.

They had passed the final vestiges of civilization. Here lay a swampy jungle of bearded live oak, holly and tamarack. Chinaberry, maroon-starred anise, and pink-bellied laurel crowded under the tall gums and black-jack on the ridges, while along the unbridged creek branches, coarse sword grass and pitcher plants grew more than knee-high.

Back from the road, such as it was, a man careless of his life might have discovered hidden, ramshackle one-room cabins. Likely enough his welcome would have been the battering smash of buckshot. In decades past

(for Alabama had State prohibition long before the nation swung in line), a few daring revenue officers and enforcement agents had taken their chances in this hinterland, sleuthing down the sour odor of cooking shinny mash. Few of them ever returned. The rest probably were shot, dragged to swampy pools, fed to the 'gators and the chinquapin perch.

SPLASHING through bumpy creek fords, where often the depth of water came almost to the car's distributor, stalling hub deep in loose, drifted sand, digging out, plugging on in low gear, Ben and Jack progressed for another hour.

"If we make it it 'll be by main strength and awkwardness," said Ben grimly. His black hair was straggling wetly across his forehead. "Wouldn't ever think they could 've hauled cotton down this road."

"Ox teams and niggers," said Jack briefly. "The overseers and owners rode hossback. I'd spell you at the wheel, old-timer—on'y, I'm playin' a hunch."

"Oh, that's all right. It can't be more'n a mile or two now. What is the hunch?"

For several moments Jack did not answer. He was peering ahead through the open windshield. Then his blue eyes narrowed and seemed to sparkle. "If I ain't teetotally mistook," he drawled, reverting to the idiom of his boyhood, "the case card's comin' up right now!" He gestured ahead.

As they cleared the last sandy curve Ben saw. Two iron posts on either side of the road, supported an arch of rusted iron filigree work. Fifteen feet from the ground—so the high loaded cotton wagons of the old days had had clearance—this arch bore the legend:

ROARK'S CASINO

Beneath the arch, blocking the way, a mousy-looking yoke of oxen had

halted, and now stood with drooping heads. Behind them was a seatless wagon, high latticed on front and sides—empty except for a tall, saturnine-visaged man of swarthy skin, who lounged with elbows on the lattice, evidently waiting the approach of this gas-fed interloper and its occupants.

"Drive up right close, then cut the switch," whispered Jack. Without appearing to do so he opened the door at his side about an inch.

Ben Straker frowned. "What the hell's this guy think he's doing?" he rumbled. He jammed the heel of his left hand on the horn button.

At the musical double note one of the oxen raised its head a few inches. The other continued to mope at the ground. The saturnine stranger did not move a muscle.

Ben cut the switch. "Hey, pull out and let us through, won't you, pardner?" he called.

"Cain't get through, nobow. Bad road ahead."

"Well, we'll take a chance. Pull out, please. All we want is to—"

"Cain't get through. Strangers ain't wanted."

Ben Straker's jaw muscles tightened. "I don't happen to be a stranger! Now get out of my way or I'll smash those damned cows of yours into hamburger steak!" He jammed his foot on the starter; the motor whirred, accelerated with a rush.

Ben's hand did not complete the gear shift; things happened too swiftly.

"I was tellin' you-all—" snarled the ox driver, and reached downward for something which had been leaning against the lattice on his right. His hand came up swiftly, bringing a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun.

With a leap Jack Sennett flashed through the open door of the car, landing crouched and straddle-legged in the sand. A pistol blue and blunt was jammed against his right hip.

Crack! Crack! Twice the army automatic spat lead.

The saturnine stranger spun around, an astounded expression on his face. He fell backward toward the tail gate, his gun with him.

Came a terrific double report—both barrels of the cocked ten-gauge shotgun letting go.

Spatters of blood and flesh went backward into the air.

"Great God, Jack, it's murder!" exclaimed Ben in a shocked voice, when both were looking down at the grotesque remnants of a man.

"Murder?" repeated Jack Sennett in his slowest drawl. "Well, lessee. I hit him in the elbow an' wrist—an' him pullin' a shotgun on us like he meant business. You kin see wheah I hit. I don't miss ve'y far, mos' times."

He pointed at the two minor wounds which had ceased to bleed.

"But Jack—"

"But hell," interrupted Jack Sennett pithily. "Wheah I come from a man doesn't pull a gun 'less'n he aims to use it! This hombre *did*—an' don't you ever think different! I told you I was playin' a hunch; got it from that nigger back in that last town we stopped. Now this jigger's face is clean blowed off, we won't know who he was. S'pose we call him Little Casino."

He glanced up wryly at the filigreed arch of Roark's Casino.

Ben shook his head. "You're right, I reckon, old-timer," he said, "but what the Washington County sheriff will think, I—"

Jack Sennett snorted. "It 'd done you a heap of good, Ben, if you'd gone up to Mer Rouge. Your soul is bleached pale pink, though it was plumb red at St. Mihiel. S'pose you take those almost-he-cows out somewheres an' turn 'em loose. I'll see to this carrion."

He lifted the legs of the dead man, claspings the booted feet to his arm-

pits, and trudged away downhill toward the nearest boggy creek.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HALF WAY HOUSE.

For nearly half a century, or until railway connections opened the more lucrative markets of Huntsville, Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, nearly all the cotton of the State passed down this road through the untouched wilderness. Banditry flourished. One of the most notorious hangouts was known as the "Half Way House." This was about two days and nights from Mobile, a tavern started by one Roark Mims. Later it came into the possession of one Standish Denison, who seems to have been a more polished type of rascal. Later an astounding winning at *rouge et noir* passed the title to another family.—"*History of Alabama*," by C. B. Janecky.

"WELL, buddy, here's your estate!" Jack Sennett grinned boyishly; the mere death of an enemy had come to mean to him less than the lack of a handkerchief on some needed occasion.

"Ours!" gritted Ben Straker. He could not dismiss a killing, even though justified, as carelessly as he would needle out a red bug from under his thumb nail. "You're fifty-fifty with me—on every cent we realize—and on every foot of rope we stretch for that killing!"

Jack Sennett looked around slowly. His eyes came down to narrow slits, but they smiled. "Aw, be yourself, Ben!" he adjured. "If I don't miss two-three guesses, we got more killin's to do. S'pose you take the next one? S'far's money's concerned, I hope you get it, if you want it. Me, I don't care much. I've allus wanted to buy a ticket to N'York an' back, an' have a thousand bucks to blow in two-three days while I'm there. If this hyar unk o' yours pans out—"

Ben stopped the car just inside the brush-overgrown entrance of what

once had been the Monte Carlo of America. His big muscled arm went around the shoulders of the slender Jack Sennett.

"Either you take this with me, fifty-fifty—and never crawl out again—or here's where you walk back!" stated Ben Straker in a rumbling, decisive tone.

"Hell, do I have to *kiss* you?" squealed Jack in a derisive falsetto. Then his voice changed back to its normal barytone drawl. "This stake's so big, buddy, I wanted to give you your chance to th'ow me down. Lotsa guys 'd feel thataway, don't think they wouldn't. Me, I take your crazy unk pretty serious. I never seen him, but—"

"I'm taking him seriously," said Ben Straker. "It's understood for keeps, then, we're splittin' even?"

"Cracked down, you almost-millionaire!"

"Let's try and get it!" grinned Ben Straker affectionately.

Roark's Casino had gone back to jungle. Ben and Jack turned right into the key shell drive—the palm-lined entrance which once had welcomed the returning cotton planters, rich from their sales at Mobile.

Now Choctaw rose, that incredible vine which climbs one tree, climbs down, goes over a wall, wrecks a fence, keeps on going till it finds another tree, *ad infinitum* (strands of this State flower of Alabama have been exhibited, over four hundred feet long), had throttled the fifteen-foot palms. It had crossed the key shell road in its relentless pursuit of more trees to ruin. Ben, turning in, with the sturdy car snorting in second, shoved into neutral, then cut the switch. Before the car was a white-flowered barrier, intertwined and prickly, higher than the head of a tall man. The Choctaw rose apparently had decided that this man-way had run its course, and should be given back to the beautiful but merciless forces of nature.

"Reckon we stop here."

"Looks thataway," agreed Jack. "It 'd take a wire-cuttin' platoon to clear all that stuff. Wheah's the house—or is there a house? You didn't say."

"There was once," grinned Ben. "This was where the Denison gang used to hang out. You know as much about it now as I do. S'pose we just go ahead and explore? I reckon our stuff 'll be safe enough." He slid out from the wheel, stretching aching arms above his head.

Jack Sennett hesitated, then settled back. "I'm still playin' my hunch, Ben," he said almost apologetically. "You go an' see. I'll stay with the bus—for a while, anyway."

BEN nodded, and walked forward. Oddly enough, far at one side he found a hole—what seemed to be a gateway through the Choctaw rose. Ahead of him the overgrown but still white key shell drive curved onward.

"Looks easy," he called back, and reached to brush aside a single waist-high strand.

Jack Sennett got out before he answered. "Don't be sure of a damn thing!" he warned, a frown transfiguring his easy-smiling face. "You got a gun, ain'tchu?"

"Sure. I wasn't up to Mer Rouge, but I—"

Wham-m-m!

In the still woods, where even the throbbing of the motor had ceased, the explosion was incredible and dreadful. Ben looked over grimly. Jack Sennett looked forward, his mouth agape. In front of the car that queer, overgrown barrier of Choctaw rose suddenly had been dynamited! Both men had to dodge the spines and fragments which rained down.

"Huh," said Ben a moment or two later. "I've heard how they sometimes set these vine trigger mantraps for strangers they don't want. They aren't a darned bit hospitable up here

in the piney woods. It 'd been a swell idea if we'd just closed the windshield and tried to drive through! What d'you think?"

Jack Sennett grinned. "Me? The further we go the tougher it gets—an' I reckon your esteemed unk must 've lived in the last house! But he wasn't half as crazy as we are!"

Warily they went forward, stopping now and then to listen. The air was still, humid, and there was no sound except the occasional flutter of "red-birds"—cardinals—which were everywhere through the untrimmed shrubbery.

Now they could see the general lay of the land. Two artificial terraces shelved downward and away. Below, perhaps an eighth of a mile from them, showed the sparkle of water in the afternoon sunlight. This later proved to be a pair of man-made ponds, one six feet higher than the other, and the two connected by a trickling fall of water which flowed over gray coral.

Though the ponds were littered with leaves and the accumulated trash of decades, and doubtless were unsafe for bathing now because of alligators, the water in them was clear and cold.

Ben and Jack postponed that particular investigation for the time being, for on the brink of the terrace at their left appeared the first of a group of buildings, set in the midst of a grove of giant magnolias. From a little distance these trees made a picture of white-flecked beauty; but when one approached, their very silence, the huge, stovepipe roots which curled along the surface of the ground like pythons, and even the heavy fragrance of their blossoms somehow became depressing and sinister.

"Doesn't look like much of a Monte Carlo now," commented Jack, eying the huge and long-unpainted casino, and the trailing string of dilapidated shacks which once had served it as guest and servant quarters.

Ben grinned wryly. "Let's explore.

That looks like the front door." He pointed at a tangle of jasmine and ivy which had run wild across the sagging posts of the front gallery.

But Jack held his arm. "Yeah, looks like it was the front door once," he drawled, "so let us go in a window. They've got cute ways, around here, of touching off TNT in your face when you act natural."

Ingress proved easy, as few of the windows—tall rectangles, whose sills were only two feet from the ground—had any glass, and the iron grilles were rusted away. Ben and Jack found themselves in what once must have been a sort of reception hall with a cloakroom at one end.

The hall, which ran two-thirds of the width of the house, was dim and musty. Some broken-down chairs and a davenport, which once had been upholstered in red plush, stood about disconsolately. The wall paper was browned and faded. Here and there it had been ripped off in long strips.

At the farther end of the hall once had been a billiard room, housing four tables. Only wrecks of tables remained. The green felt had been ripped off, bed plates smashed and thrown to the dusty floor, and the mahogany frames chopped to pieces.

"Somebody else looking for treasure," commented Ben.

"Sh-h!" Jack gripped his shoulder. "D'you hear anything?"

For a moment both held their breath. Then Ben silently shook his head. Since St. Mihiel he had been slightly deaf. Jack tiptoed back to the nearest door to the main part of the casino. Cautiously, with pistol ready against his hip, he eased it open a few inches.

Tick-a-tick-a-tick! The sound came plainly now through the ominous silence.

"Good Lord, a time bomb!" whispered Jack, and threw wide the door. Inside the vast room, which once had held the roulette wheels and the faro

layouts, was utter confusion. Dust and litter, smashed tables, chairs, twisted candlesticks and a pile of nondescript trash almost knee-deep lay on the floor.

Of a sudden Ben laughed, the sound echoing like hollow mockery through the abandoned room. "There's your time bomb," he pointed. "Maybe you've got too much 'maginashun'!"

On a mantel above the wide brick hearth ticked away a large eight-day gilt clock.

"It's the ormolu clock old Zeke told us about!"

"Yeah!" agreed Jack, staring as if he expected the mechanism to jump at him. "Mebbe so—but doesn't it strike you kind of strange that the damn thing should be *going*?"

CHAPTER V.

A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT.

SHADOWS of evening now were darkening the magnolias; and as there was much preparation to be made before sleeping in this hulk of a place, Ben went back to the car and drove it carefully through the *débris* where had been the barrier of Choctaw rose. Jack made shift to clear out the trash from one of the smaller rooms, where later they set up their canvas cots.

With a fire burning in the great main hearth and three small lanterns aglow in the eerie corridors, much of the sinister aspect of the ancient place faded away and was lost. Bringing in their blankets and supplies, they made a sketchy meal of coffee, ham, beans and Swedish hardtack.

Jack Sennett took the bucket and nonchalantly went out to seek drinkable water, as they had used their gallon thermos for the coffee. He discovered a rusty windlass over a well, down back of the old kitchen buildings; but the wheel and chain came to pieces in his hands. This certainly had not been the place where old Zeke had

drawn water. Remembering the pond he had glimpsed down the terrace, Jack grimaced dubiously, but made his way toward it.

Two minutes later he was back, a little pale, wet to the thighs—and carrying less than a half pail of water.

"Me, I'm goin' thirsty nights from now on!" he announced, breathing fast. "Oh-h boy, this ain't like home an' mother!"

"See something to scare you?"

"Scaih?" drawled Jack, beginning to grin. "No, I don't *ever* scare—I just go kind of weak and funny inside, and my knees wobble."

"What happened?" Ben blew out a ring of bluish pipe smoke.

"Well, I went down to that there pond we saw, comin' in. It looked kind of shallow—and it was mighty dark, too, down there behind those trees—so I walked out on a long log beside the pond and dipped my bucket. *And then the log started to walk into the water!* This-here record holdin' Charlie Paddock himself never did the two-twenty any faster'n I did, comin' away from that 'gator!"

Sitting there on their cots, the three small lanterns furnishing light, they wielded pliers, screwdriver, and the tiny automobile tools used for electrical adjustments; and so took apart the big gilt clock which Zeke Straker had claimed held the secret of a fabulous fortune.

They found absolutely nothing in it, except the springs and wheels and pawls and gadgets necessary to time-keeping.

"Looks like a water-haul," said Ben, disappointment in his voice. "I thought we'd find a map, or a cipher, or something like that. Old Zeke—"

"Had imagination. I'm beginning to wish I'd met the ancient hellion. We're not giving up, Ben. Other people know there's something around this place—an' they want that something bad enough so's they'll shoot us down or blow us to hell an' never think about

it again. Put away all the parts of that clock where they'll be safe. We'll look at 'em closer in the sunshine. Now I'd just as soon hit the hay. D'you suppose we ought to take turns—"

S c r e e e e o w w w s s s m c c h s p i t t !

Both men were jolted up standing as an unearthly, inhuman scream split the air. It was nerve-shaking, horrible with its burden of agony! And both men realized it never had been sounded in this fashion by any unhurt wild beast known to the piney woods jungle.

Screeeeowww! Spitttt!

The awesome sound came again, though not so long drawn out. Pistol in hand, Jack Sennett dashed out to the main corridor, down into the old gambling hall where the fire on the hearth still flickered.

Something round and furry dashed from one dark corner to another, bumping into fragments of furniture on its way. It came streaking out, clawed its way up a pillar to the mantel above the fireplace, all the while emitting those terrible sounds.

Jack lifted the pistol, fired twice. The intruder tumbled from the mantel, kicking. Then it lay still.

"Bobcat," said Jack succinctly. He lifted it gingerly. Then he sniffed. "Turpentine in its eyes! Sa-ay, I'd like to have a half nelson on the louse who did that! But look out. He must have thrown it through the window. Perhaps he's waiting—"

Crack! Click!

His automatic fired once, then refused. He had forgotten to insert a fresh clip.

Jack ducked into the shadows away from the fire, and Ben followed swiftly.

"Some one was waiting at the window—prob'ly with a shotgun. A mean-lookin' jigger with a black hat. I don't see him now—though I know damn well I didn't hit him. Forgot to reload. I was jumpy from listening to that

cat. Don't you reckon now we'd better take turns on watch?"

"You bet!" agreed Ben earnestly. For some time they waited in the dark. Then, on hands and knees, they returned to the little room, and quickly extinguished the lights—but not until they had made a queer and alarming discovery.

The pillow slip, containing all those jingling, metallic parts of the ormolu clock, had vanished from the head of Ben's bed! And their packs had been hastily ransacked, the contents strewn on the floor.

CHAPTER VI.

DEPUTY.

THE innate strength and stubbornness of Ben Straker were fully aroused. The decoy had been perfect. It had allowed a thief time to step in through the window, go through their belongings, and get away with the one item spoken of by Zeke Straker, the strange old clock. Probably the marauders had not guessed its importance until Ben and Jack had singled it out for inspection. Ben's mouth straightened from its usual line of good humor, and he shook his head decidedly when Jack, shrugging, observed that they had been outmaneuvered and probably had lost their only chance.

"I'd sure liked to have looked over the innards of that clock in daylight," said the man from New Orleans. "But they've got us on the hip, it seems like. Of course you've still got this place; but anybody who'd pay sixty thousand for it would be a nut."

"I don't know," said Ben. "There are nineteen hundred and twenty acres, most of them with timber uncut. That is a real value—but it's something to worry about later. I'm going to stick. Somewhere there's a cache of treasure; I'm believing more and more in old Zeke. I'm going to locate

it, clock or no clock, if I have to take this old shack apart timber by timber!"

"Well, my time isn't what you'd call priceless, right now," agreed Jack. "And I'd like to tangle with the hombre who could do that sort of thing even to a bobcat. I'll stick. S'pose we finish up our survey. I'm getting a hunch, slow but sure. It's this. There's a good-sized gang that knows about some kind of treasure being here. Maybe they're descendants of the old Denison outlaws; maybe not. Maybe they've brains; maybe not. But one thing looks now like a prime certainty, to me. They lack nerve. That jigger who was going to gun us from the ox-cart wasn't all yellow, but he's gone. I'm betting the rest of them *are* yellow. So let's get going with our wrecking job."

Going over the smaller shacks adjoining the casino, next morning, they discovered the place where old Zeke probably had slept. Every scrap of bedding and furniture had been torn to pieces by ruthless searchers; but from a few small personal articles, and two letters crumpled and thrown aside.

One of the two letters was written by himself, from France. Zeke had got it at Citronelle. There was nothing of present importance in it, though it brought back vividly to Ben the gory days in the St. Mihiel salient.

The second epistle was far more peculiar—considering Zeke. It was a short, typed script, bearing the letter-head of the American Metals Corporation; signed by the name of a third vice president, "per C. D." It read:

DEAR MR. STRAKER:

It would please us to have a look at your samples. Could you not bring some to us? Our representative, Mr. L. K. Caldwell, will be registered at the Battle House, Mobile, during the entire week of January 8, 1918.

Of course I must tell you that exhaustive tests will be necessary, since we have no knowledge of any such amount of ZZZZZZ entering this country or being discovered here.

I certainly hope that you will talk to Mr. Caldwell, and let him see what you have.

"What in the name of time do six Z's in a row stand for?" demanded Jack. "I took some chem in high school, but I've forgotten it all now. You used to be a shark in lab."

Ben shook his head. "That's no chemical formula. It's just a bit of war terminology, covering some metallic substance of great value to combatants—perhaps to the makers of steel—"

"Tungsten!" guessed Jack.

"Perhaps," nodded Ben; but he frowned, then shook his head. "Even refined, that much tungsten—nearly a million dollars' worth of it—couldn't be hidden. Too bulky. If worst comes to worst we probably can find out from that company—at least find out what old Zeke thought he had. He may have been wrong, of course. The letter sounds skeptical enough."

"But I understood this was gold, and dope, and rubies!"

Ben grinned. "I feel the birth pains of an imagination," he returned. "Reckon I'm beginning to understand old Zeke for the first time. I'm starting my search with the cupola. S'pose you begin with the cellar."

"Cracked down!" said the smiling Jack. "The usual thing, I suppose—trapdoors, digging in the red clay—"

He got no further. From outside came a sound which froze them both to questioning immobility. It was a long, mellifluous double note from the horn of their own automobile!

HERMANN BENDESEN was no shyster lawyer. He was a serious youth who, three or four years earlier, had taken his degree at Tulane, and who had worked up to thirty dollars a week as a junior pleader—a criminal lawyer to whom were intrusted many of the petty cases which came to the Mobile firm of Lott, Mason & Schermerhorn.

Hermann wore imitation tortoiseshell glasses. He was lean without being either wiry or especially strong. His mouth was small; but from a habit of compression the lips were pale and almost invisible. All his thirty years he had idealized and idolized the law; and this was his first big case outside the firm's regular business. He was allowed to drum up private clients—provided these did not interfere with his routine job.

True, this case had been most irregular. He blinked behind his thick lenses as he stood outside the rickety casino. Many things about the whole proposition struck him as queer. Yet his retainer of fifty dollars had been paid. All he had to do was to make an offer. These dwellers of the piney woods were spending money they might as well have saved—or so he thought. The way they went around with shotguns, too, made him wonder. Possibly this was a feud, and the principals could not talk one to another, without shooting it out. He had read of such situations.

Now, standing beside the car which had been pointed out to him, he suddenly found himself confronted by a big, hazel-eyed man who carried a forty-five Colt automatic, its barrel couched across the crook of his left elbow. Ben Straker stood with arms folded, looking at the newcomer.

"Well?" Ben asked.

"You can put away the gat, Ben," drawled a voice from the shrubbery behind. "If he makes any funny motions, I'll drill him."

Hermann Bendesen started. Yet he did not shiver or act in the least frightened. "I have come to see Mr. Benjamin Straker; my name is Hermann Bendesen. I am from Mobile, an attorney-at-law."

"Pleased t'meetcha," drawled the voice out of the scrub.

Ben also acknowledged the introduction, told his name, and thrust away the pistol. Jack Sennett could be de-

pended on to guard against any sort of surprise; and this blond young fellow seemed harmless. "What seems to be on your mind?"

It appeared that there was much on the mind of Hermann Bendesen. Seating himself upon the running board of the car, he withdrew a sheaf of papers from his breast pocket, thumbed them over, and then began a dry sort of peroration.

Reduced to essentials, it seemed that his client—one he regretfully was obliged not to name at the present moment—had discovered a flaw in the title by which this realty, namely, the nineteen hundred and twenty acres and various buildings constituting the estate of one Ezekiel Straker, deceased, had been passed unto his grand-nephew, one Benjamin Straker. Since a sentimental rather than a real value was involved, the buildings being in an atrocious state of repair, and the land worth little more than fifty cents an acre—and so on—interminably—

"All right, what about it?" demanded Ben impatiently at last. "Any flawed title will have to be passed on by the courts, of course. What are you after?"

In the course of time it came out. Hermann Bendesen, LL.B., was all prepared to make a legal contest of title in behalf of a client he did not wish to name at the moment—but a client who asseverated that he, and not old Zeke Straker, had been the rightful owner of the property in question! Meanwhile, to avoid the expensive suit, and the delays consequent thereto, Hermann's client was willing to pay a nominal sum to Benjamin Straker, legatee, for relinquishment of title—even if flawed.

"I AM empowered," said Hermann in his most sonorous court voice, "to offer you one thousand dollars, for immediate evacuation of said property, and immediate surrender of title by deed. This seems a very fair offer.

and one which you should consider. It—"

From the oak scrub came a melancholy, drawling voice to interrupt:

"I don' wanna million dollars
Most of all!
I don' wanna be the President
'Cause even that's too small!"

Ben quickly concluded matters. He had no intention of selling, for one thousand dollars or one hundred times that sum. Even the threat of an injunction, served from Mobile, brought only a snort of derisive laughter from him. Too well for any lawyer's bluffing he knew the court processes as they usually were applied to the hinterland of Alabama's piney-woods. Some time he might lose title to these acres, provided enough money and influence pushed its way into court. But meanwhile there was a game to be played to its finish—and more and more Ben Straker had come to believe in the worth of that game, changing his old, careless evaluation of his ancient relative, Zeke.

Nettled but thoughtful, Hermann Bendesen made his way back toward the main road outside. He was no woodsman, and did not guess that well in the rear, going as silently as any New Orleans *Item* editor could hope to prowls through the piney-woods, a curly-haired youth with an army pistol in hand trailed him.

One hundred yards outside the filigreed iron arch of Roark's Casino, two other stealthy figures came out of the scrub to meet the lawyer. A brief colloquy ensued. Poor Hermann, not understanding the men with whom he dealt, told the simple truth of his defeat, and began a long dissertation on the possibilities of the injunction. He was a city man, and did not know.

He was cut short. A dark man in overalls thrust a shotgun abruptly into midriff.

"A'right, yer done! Cough up the jack!" he snarled.

"I—my good man, what do you mean?" Hermann's tortoise-shell glasses fell down his nose into the sand.

Hermann soon found out. "Retainers" meant nothing at all to these men of the woods. He was relieved of the fifty dollars, and sent south, walking. Even his pockets were rifled of all extra currency and papers.

Two days later he wobbled into Whistler, a suburb of Mobile. And there he got a phone connection, before he collapsed. No matter what, Hermann Bendesen never would take another case in the heart of the piney-woods.

"I got a look at two of 'em!" related Jack Sennett joyfully, an hour later. "Sure! Like I said, they're yellow as hell! A'right, let's go! Me for the cellar!"

CHAPTER VII.

"MAGINASHUN."

ON two occasions rifle bullets smashed into the walls near them during the next six days. But neither Ben nor Jack heard from Johnny Law, as he was constituted in Mobile. And there was no harm from the two bullets; evidently both had been fired from a distance, with no better aim than lighted windows of the old casino.

Ben and Jack went about their work, and that seemed to be a digging, pounding, tapping job which would take in every square inch of walls and floor remaining untouched.

Much of the upstairs previously had been hacked and pounded, but without apparent system. Ben first made a perilous way over the roof, where loose, handmade shingles slid out or crumbled beneath his feet. The four chimneys were the only possible hiding places; but at least, as far as their tumbled bricks showed above the roof, they held no secret.

Beginning then a systematic survey

of walls, ceilings and floors, Ben put in days of drudgery, with no result. Below stairs Jack Sennett was digging up the clay floor of the basement, and finding nothing.

He was becoming disgusted. "As *Sherlock Holmes*, we just ain't. What d'you make of it, doc?" he asked satirically, the evening of their sixth day in the old casino.

Ben puffed thoughtfully on a pipeful of his acrid perique. He did not answer for half a minute. Then he raised his tall frame, got to his feet, blowing out a final blue cloud.

"I've been holding out on you—some," he said. "Since it appeared that old Zeke was aiming only to insult me personally, I didn't say anything about it. Come on up." He moved to the ornate stairway. At the second landing he paused. The balustrade had been hacked and smashed until it leaned crazily. Each of the hand-carved newel posts had been split by the blow of an ax.

Jack Sennett dumped some flaky tobacco into a wheat straw, and started to roll himself a cigarette, as he obediently followed his comrade. He cheerfully whistled:

"There's something wrong, wrong—
Sure, I know it's wrong!
Hear that trombone off the key?
The sax is sad,
The French horn's bad—
The piccolo goes *sque-e-e-e!*
Even the tu-ba—ba-ba-bah,
Ain't the guy he used to be—"

"Well, I'll be damned!" The lugubrious melody of that jazz band gone cuckoo, stopped in mid-whistle. Jack Sennett forgot to light the cigarette he was holding. Ben Straker, putting into the exertion all the muscle of his arms, thighs and broad back, simply had lifted out—or torn out—a ten-foot section of the balustrade, posts and all, chucking the heavy wood with an echoing crash over into the curve of the second landing.

"Reckon our ancestral palace soon

ain't going to be cards an' spades, let alone Big Casino!" observed Jack dryly.

"Look here. Reach down!" Ben ignored the jest, pointing to a convex hole in the hand-hewed beam, where the newel post had been rooted. There was a cavity, perhaps nine inches in depth.

Jack reached. His fingers closed on something cylindrical and hard. "Good gosh, the treasure!" Under paper or some similar covering he discovered the edge of about one dozen coins!

"Nope," disagreed Ben, beginning to smile. "Just bait. Look at it!"

THE heavy cylinder which Jack lifted and examined contained ten fresh minted twenty-dollar gold pieces, bound in heavy paper after the fashion used in shipping currency of this nature to banks. Bound to the outside of the cylinder by a rubber band was a single sheet evidently torn from a ruled notebook. On this was scrawled in pencil:

Jest day wages for sumbuddy
thout no maginashun.

ZEKE.

Jack clinked out the beautiful coins into one palm, and jingled them. "Shucks," he grinned, "I'll bet Baron Münchausen had to collect time and one-half for overtime to make day wages as good as these!"

He passed over the gold, and Ben promptly handed back five of the coins.

"Fifty-fifty," he reminded. "That was the—"

The sentence died in his throat. From somewhere below stairs came a muffled *thump-thump-thump*—a vague, faint, curious sound such as might have been made by tossing tiny lumps of wet dough at a bass drum.

"We got competition," whispered Jack. "Take it easy. More'n likely it's a trap. They ain't got nerve enough to come prowlin' here before we even get to sleep, unless—"

As stealthily as possible they descended the stairs, Ben leading.

At the first landing Jack put a hand restrainingly upon Ben's shoulder. He leaned close and whispered. "It's the basement—where I've been digging! You go ahead, but take it easy. I got an idea."

So while Ben tiptoed slowly through the dark corridor toward the rear of the casino, where a well-like stairway led to the dugout basement—an old-time wine cellar and vegetable storehouse—Jack Sennett went back upstairs. He had reviewed rapidly in his mind the floor plans of the casino, and realized that there was just one approach to the basement from the outside—a slanting cellar door at the side of the shack which once had been the kitchen. Jack had a hunch, one that was based upon his estimates of the courage of their unknown opponents.

One glance downward from the rear upstairs gallery confirmed his hunch. The rotted doors of the cellar entry had been thrown back. In front of them, commanding the staircase down which Ben Straker would have to come if he entered the scene at all, a man lay prone. Jack could see him only vaguely in the filtered moonlight, but there was no doubt about the weapon he held trained upon the bottom of that inside staircase. Shotgun. Probably a ten gauge double-barrel, that most popular weapon of the woods—one which will make cannibal mincemeat out of a man in the belching breath of a split second.

Without the delay of an instant, Jack swung out from the window. The roof of the old kitchen was only five feet below. He held onto the window sill until he was certain he would not break through, then let himself down to hands and knees.

It was a steep-pitched roof, and the shingles were loose and rotten. Taking care that his army pistol was free in its sheath, he moved downward. Owning possibly to his light weight, he

made little noise. Once a shingle came loose and rattled under his knee; but apparently the man with the shotgun was not expecting attack from this direction. Or possibly the measured *thump-thump-thump* from within the cellar distracted his attention.

Jack gained the low eaves. He peered over, took out the pistol. The man was still there, presenting his broad back—a target impossible to miss from a height of eight feet.

The man above thrust back the pistol. Despite the fact that these crooks and brigands had tried to murder Ben and himself, he could not kill a man in cold blood. Better wait and see what they were about.

But waiting was not in order. At that moment the cellar stairs squeaked audibly. The thumping ceased. Whoever was in the cellar called an incoherent warning. The prone man stiffened, lifting the shotgun. And that second, Jack leaped from the roof.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET OF THE CLOCK.

TWO separate battles ensued instantly. Crashing with his knees and the heels of his hands upon the man with the shotgun, Jack sprained his left wrist—and almost killed the recipient of his attentions, if he only had known. But he did not wait to find out.

One hundred and fifty-five pounds of devastating fury went into action that instant. Punching, hammering, the more ferociously because of the pain which had shot up the length of his left arm, Jack gave the man no time to turn. The shotgun exploded; but because the intruder had attempted to swing it about to meet this unexpected menace, the double charge of buckshot slashed futilely skyward through the magnolia blossoms. Five seconds later the sentinel went limp. He would have no interest in proceedings for many minutes.

"An' that t' get married on!" gulped Jack, planting one final and needless blow on his antagonist's chin. He staggered up, pulling out his pistol.

In the basement, helped by only one smoking lantern, an entirely different sort of engagement had started. A heavy-set, sullen individual had been engaged in a curious operation. With a long straight sword, the sort Confederate officers had affected in those first tragic months of '61, he was sounding out the clay floor below the rather aimless excavations performed by Jack Sennett. He had bound cloth around the hilt and pommel of the sword. In his hand was a mallet, padded with cotton batting and cloth. With the mallet he was driving vertically the blade of the sword.

Since in this part of Alabama—formed ages ago by the silt and clay brought down by many flooded rivers—there is almost no rubble or outcrop of stone, the intruder's plan was obvious. Somehow he had guessed or learned that Zeke's treasure was hidden in the basement of the casino. Sounding to a depth of two feet below the excavations already made, surely would prove or disprove his suspicions. If the blade hit anything, save hard red clay, that something probably would be a treasure chest!

Ben Straker had come cautiously into that well of darkness which surrounded the cellar stairs. His caution was wasted, however. In the dim light of a single lantern he caught sight of the intruder pounding down the blade of steel—yanking it up to try a new location.

Then hell broke loose outside. Jack Sennett had landed on the back of the man with the shotgun, and the weapon had belched forth its double load of buckshot. Sounds of a short but serious struggle—then silence.

Meanwhile, however, Ben Straker had his hands fully occupied. The cellar skulker whirled about with a curse, evidently realizing that the guard on

whom he had placed reliance was out of the picture.

"Damn yo', take *that!*" he grunted, and flung the short-handled, padded hammer.

Ben dodged. The heavy mallet ricocheted from his shoulder, but did little damage. Ben leaped down to the clay floor just as the intruder wrenched free the long steel blade and came for him.

Ben shot once, almost involuntarily, but the bullet seemed to take no effect. With both hands on the hilt of the sword, the intruder lunged. It was awkward, of course; yet in that cramped space there was only one thing left to do. Trusting that he would not get that length of Toledo steel through his cranium, Ben dived like a football tackler. He left the third-from-the-bottom step straight out, horizontally. He hit the clay, his chest and stomach almost knocked into his backbone; but his strong arms closed about the ankles of the heavy-set man in a grip which could not be broken.

Something seared Ben's scalp, but at the moment he did not know or care. He had thrown a man fully a match for him in sheer strength, and one who fought like a catamount.

Over and over, the sword and the pistol both forgotten, the two men scrambled, rolled, pounded, gouged. They went the length of the basement, ending in the coal-bin, where a momentary yielding of the coal gave Ben the needed advantage.

He slammed down one fist vertically, striking the other just at the bridge of his flat nose. The intruder goggled, gasped—and went limp.

"Glad you got him," drawled Jack Sennett. He was standing with a lantern in one hand and an automatic in the other. "I was just about to plug him."

"C-carry on!" gasped Ben, wiping away a gush of blood which seemed to come from the roots of his hair. "I—"

"Sure, take it easy, pardner," grinned Jack. "Lemme have your belt

and suspenders, though—or don't you wear s'penders? Reckon there ain't a good rope around the place, but these two ugly customers sure oughta be tied up tight!"

THERE proved to be much to puzzle about. Neither of the two captives would talk; they preserved a sullen silence. Who they were—except that they must have been the clients of the Mobile lawyer who had made that one ridiculous offer for a relinquishment of claim upon the property—did not appear.

Ben had an inspiration. "I wonder just what indictments they've got in Mobile County against you Denisons?" he asked casually. "Seems to me there are some old rewards."

They were upstairs before the hearth. Both captives started, visibly scared. They seemed tongue-tied, however, and said nothing except to mouth vague threats concerning what would happen to these interlopers once their kin of the piney-woods were apprised of the new difficulty. Of course Ben paid no attention to that.

A search of the two prisoners yielded just one thing. In the trousers pocket of the man who had been hammering down the sword, was a spiral of black metal—thin, spring steel—perhaps two and one-half inches in diameter, three-eighths of an inch wide.

"My gosh, that's from the ormolu clock!" breathed Jack Sennett, at first glance. "Any trick to it?"

There was a trick, though it took them several hours to discover it. Old Zeke Straker had possessed some justification for his implied boast about the secret which he had hidden in this clock—one his unimaginative nephew probably never could solve, for lack of the requisite "maginashun."

On the black enamel of the clock mainspring had been scratched a succession of letters, running all the way along, into the very heart of the mainspring. This was the apparently mean-

ingless conglomeration; one which took up almost the whole coiled length of the mainspring; but white lead, or some other paint had been rubbed into the scratches, so they were distinct.

Ben Straker pulled out the stiff spring, then he grinned. "If these hombres won't tell us what they were looking for, I reckon I can do it, Jack. I had a whole year with the cipher experts—and this looks like one of the simplest of the German codes."

"Huh, lessee," asked Jack Sennett skeptically. He took the work sheet which Ben had prepared from the figures from the spring of the mysterious ormolu clock.

"Too easy for words—why, these chaps solved it!" said Ben.

"Huh, maybe they were in the war, too—on one side or the other. You say it's a German cipher?"

"Yes, one of the simplest. Look."

Ben demonstrated his work sheet. It had taken him a little labor and experimentation to discover just the complication which had been introduced. But he had chanced upon it—the complication being only one of the primer class of ciphers. The message on the mainspring read:

ECTZVFGTSGJKEJSBJVGRJFTP-
KYZFTLTKEATNT.

"Zeke simply transposed the alphabet, or so it seems," said Ben, a professional note creeping into his voice. "Of course he complicated that simple process—by taking two letters out of the alphabet and placing them in front of ABC. This is the way it goes; as Zeke scratched it:

"UV'ABCDEFGHIJKLMNQPQRST-
WXYZ.

"Against that place the slightly complicated transposition of the alphabet, used for the message:

"VUZYXWTSRQPONMLKJIHGFE-
DCBA.

"Once recognizing the trick, and finding the two transposed letters, U

and V, the rest reads most easily. It says,

"TREASUREFRONTTOFYOURNOSEINBASEMENTZEKE.

"Or: 'Treasure is in front of your nose in basement. Zeke.'"

Jack Sennett was willing to be more than hard-boiled with the two prisoners, but his threats got no response but sulking. There was no lack of a sinister intelligence in these men of the piney-woods; but they had nothing to reveal. They had not found the treasure left by Zeke, or they'd never have bothered these men from the south cities.

"Reckon we'll just have to tie 'em up and look farther," said Jack Sennett regretfully. "We'll keep 'em, though. Even if we don't find this treasure, if there really is one, I have a notion that these two men are wanted plenty. Maybe we can break even, anyway, on the rewards that are offered for 'em."

He was answered by a despairing groan from the man who had been the shotgun sentinel. The latter had come to consciousness.

BEN prowled over the basement. There was little to be seen. Six vegetable bins, completely empty, a floor that had been dug up to the depth of three feet. And a small coal bin, in which lay perhaps three tons of poor grade coal mixed with coke, or so it seemed—

Suddenly Ben Straker yelled. Poking around in the coal bin, he had lifted a piece of slag—certainly not coal or coke—and ran with this to the stairs.

"Eureka!" he shouted. "Jack—Jack—where are you? I've found it!" He ran up to where the skeptical Jack Sennett was keeping guard on the two prisoners. And there Ben poked the uninviting lump of seeming slag under the nose of his comrade, who looked at it with wondering distaste.

"D'you remember that letter from the American Metals Company?" Ben demanded.

"Yeah." Jack Sennett was wondering, but skeptical.

"It was a war metal old Zeke wanted to sell!"

"Uh-huh, but this here's only coke, isn't it?" Jack looked on the lump with obvious disfavor. "Coke ain't worth more'n twelve bucks a ton, is it?"

Ben Straker grinned. "Here comes the 'mashun'!" he chuckled. "Did you ever stop to figure out, Jack, why they should have a coal bin, half full of coal, in a building that never had anything but wood-burning fireplaces?"

"Huh? You mean there's no furnace here?" Jack looked about bewildered.

"Hunt it out for yourself. No, there's no furnace," smiled Ben. "The only coal you can use in an open hearth is cannel, and there isn't a trace of cannel coal here! Of course I can't be sure, but I think that this stuff is platinum!"

"Uh—what you say?" Jack looked puzzled. "Ain't platinum the white stuff they use for engagement rings and such—a sort of shiny white metal? What d'you mean, this stuff in the coal bin?"

"Exactly!" grinned Ben Straker. "This is where 'mashun' comes in, I reckon! Zeke knew I used to be a crank about chem—might have gone to Tech and ended up a mining engineer, if the border fracas and the war hadn't come along. This stuff looks to me like a smuggling venture, one that deceived everybody!"

"Huh?" Jack Sennett looked blank.

Ben grinned. "We're going to have to do a hell of a lot of supposing, to begin with, anyway."

"'Mashun,'" muttered Jack.

"Plenty of it! You remember this place used to be a hangout for bandits? The Denisons prob'ly were only one bunch out of many that used to harry the Cotton Road; and I wouldn't wonder if our two friends here had uncles or fathers or grandpaps in the last gang."

One of the prisoners moved uneasily,

glowering. "There were Strakers in it, too!" he spat out sullenly.

"What? You mean old Zeke?" Ben jerked about.

"Naw, he never had the nerve. But there was Strakers afore him."

"Hm." Ben frowned. "Mebbe so we're just recovering some treasure plus a flock of law suits," he ruminated. "There may be heirs."

"Well, get along with your fairy story," urged Jack. "I can't say that dirty-lookin' stuff sets my pocket nerve to throbbin'. Not any."

"What I meant by heirs, is this," Ben nodded. "The whole country knows that when the Denison gang was finally wiped out, they took to their graves with them the secret of an enormous cache of plunder. There was said to be a weight of gold and unset jewels worth millions—though that was probably an exaggeration. It was the truth, though, that the gang subsisted in magnificent style just selling off watches, horses, and other minor articles secured from their victims. It was the sale of a saddle horse that finally hung the deadwood on them."

"Yeh, an' a dirty sneak-traitor!" snarled the captive who had spoken before. "They tied him to a pitch-pine stump an' burned him up!"

Ben grimaced, but continued. "It looks to me as if my revered grand-uncle stumbled across that ancient cache of plunder, and realized on it."

"Yeah, Zeke found it." The volatile prisoner was speaking. "He done wrote Lonn Burras, from down Mexico way, an' give us the hoss laugh!"

"MEXICO!" nodded Ben, his eyes lighting. "Say, that fits in perfectly! He wouldn't have had any trouble getting a compact sort of treasure *into* Mexico—it's the opposite of usual. Mexico, with Russia and Colombia, is the chief source of the world's supply of platinum."

Jack Sennett was frankly bewildered. "But why did he come back, then?"

Ben shrugged. "Old Zeke was eccentric," he said. "But there just might have been a little more to it in this case. He was a patriotic old devil—tried to go as a bugler with Scott in Mexico, and was turned down because he was too young. Enlisted under Stonewall Jackson, and smashed both legs his first week with the cavalry—never got to ride again. Lied about his age when he tried to go to Cuba with the colors, and got kicked out. That was '98."

"Well, what about it?" Jack did not seem overly impressed. "Why'd he come back? There wasn't much of any demand for grand-unks in this last free-for-all."

"No—but there was a demand for platinum," said Ben slowly. "You saw that letter. I imagine old Zeke came upon a big supply of the metal somewhere in Mexico, and either bought or traded. Likely he came upon a mine owner down on his luck. And in return Zeke took a weight of platinum which had been accumulating for years in a secret hoard. Zeke came back—with a couple dozen sacks of what looked like coke. That right?" Ben fired the question at the captive who had talked.

"Uh-huh. Yeah, we stopped him, o' course, an' searched him right down to the skin. But he didn't have nothin' 'cept—"

"Except those bags of coke," finished Ben, a quiet gleam of triumph in his hazel eyes. "And the war ended. Zeke got another, even more eccentric notion—to test my maginashun. Well, as soon as I get to Mobile, and prove all this moonshine, I'm going to drink the health of old Zeke!"

WITH small emendations, plus a great deal of surmise, Ben's story was accepted. The uninviting stuff which had looked like coke there in the bin truly proved to be platinum black in the crude—that is, it assayed one part platinum and two

parts zinc, melted together as slag. In order to get the real platinum back it would be necessary to pulverize this gray-black mixture, then get rid of the zinc—but the American Metals representative saw no difficulty in this. He was frankly delighted beyond adequate expression, for platinum is one metal of which there is always a shortage. He shook hands with one of the partners or the other, every five minutes.

Even at a price which had declined greatly since the days of war, he proffered a check which made the eyes of Ben and Jack bulge out. Also, for reasons not stated in public, there was little talk about the treasure trove.

"The War Department is just tickled to death to have its hands on this," suggested Ben in a whisper, when once the deal was concluded.

Jack Sennett grinned. He passed an arm over his big comrade's shoulder. "We're all bathed, an' shaved, an' massaged, an' manicured—fussed up in new duds—d'you s'pose—" He was drawling a suggestion as he finished.

"Wait a minute," said Ben Straker. His hand was on the house telephone, but he waited before lifting the receiver. "They've given those birds the third degree—I just heard from Jennings of the *Register*. He wanted some more dope—"

"Oh, hell," mourned Jack Sennett, "another scoop for the paper of the guy 'thout maginashun'!"

"Yes, a scoop," grinned Ben. "But I sent through a wire to the *Item* in your name. You know, all this was to be fifty-fifty."

Jack started upright. "Yeh? What'd you say?" All his drawl was gone, and his eyes shone with the fervid light of a reporter on a hot story.

Deliberately Ben drew forth four closely typed yellow sheets, telegraph blanks, and handed them to his friend and partner. Swiftly Jack skimmed the first two, which summarized the tale he already knew. Then he pursed

his lips in a whistle, before reading the rest:

"Prisoners admitted belonging gang implicated Mer Rouge and other atrocities. Gang had shadowed Zeke Straker hoping find secret wealth he boasted about. He usually visited Roark's Casino about 4 P.M. and kept clock going. Gang used it later while searching and so betrayed presence to reporter. Mannie Bludsoe, brother of Tom Bludsoe, Mobile waiter, was killed by *Item* reporter in pistol versus shotgun duel—both leaders gang descendants old Denisons hanged twenty years ago. Prisoners accuse Mannie of killing Zeke Straker after Zeke's escape from their hands. They had intended torturing him, but Zeke had derringer in boot; held them up and got away only to be fatally shot at long range by choke-barreled Long Tom shotgun. (*Signed*) Jack Sennett, rehired."

A happy grin spread over Jack's face. "That's swell! Thanks, old man. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I didn't have that job—in spite of all our jäck."

"Not a damn bit of maginashun!" chuckled Ben, attempting to frown severely. "But I'll tell you what—no, I'll let you listen. I'm clear now, no jailbird, and nobody suspecting me. Well, listen."

He lifted the receiver of the house phone and spoke briefly to the operator, then hung up.

"Jack, I'll make you forget you ever were in N'Awlyins! There's a lovely girl out here who wouldn't even see me when I got out of jail. But she's going to be Mrs. Ben Straker sometime, even if she doesn't know it. And she's got the prettiest kid sister you ever saw! I'm going to make a heavy date for the both of us. I—" He was interrupted by the phone bells.

"Go to it, *compadre*!" drawled Jack Sennett. "But it shore looks to me like I gotta develop some maginashun of my own, now!"

THE END.



A bestial face appeared above the edge of the cliff

The Radio Flyers

Eric Redmond, Arctic explorer, strikes boldly for the North Pole—and finds himself launched on the weirdest voyage ever made by man

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," and "The Radio Planet"

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MYSTERIOUS radio messages which seem to come from underground to the northward are fully received at last by means of underground antennæ. They tell of the secret polar expedition sent by the Milwaukee *Eagle*. Eric Redmond and Angus Selkirk, war flyers, head the expedition, which started in the ship Cooledge, for the Greenland coast in 1925. They establish a base, then the two of them start out in their plane on May 2, 1926, racing the Byrd and Amundsen expeditions.

Strange phenomena, such as warm

north winds and ducks flying south for the summer, seem to them to lend some reality to the Eskimos' superstitions of a warm land north of the ice; but they are amazed to find, at 83°3' north, 30°6' west, an open stretch of water, with a beach, vegetation, and musk-ox! They land at "Palm Beach," as they christen it, then start again for the pole. A leak in the gas line forces them to land, and the irregular ice smashes one ski and the propeller blade. Eric takes blankets and food, and starts on a brief reconnoitering trip. When he returns—and he is sure of the berg

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for May 11.

beside which they landed—both Angus and the crippled plane are gone!

CHAPTER VI.

LOST!

ALONE figure, Eric Redmond, trudged doggedly across the frozen wastes of the Arctic. He was without food, save a few compressed rations in a small tin packet on his belt. Over one shoulder he carried a roll of the lightest possible bedding, incased in a waterproof blanket of balloon silk. Over the other shoulder was slung his Pickering polar telescope. He carried no weapons.

The sun circled continuously at a low angle, now dipping higher, now lower, but never quite disappearing below the horizon, for he was very near the apex of the earth.

Having given up all hope of rescue, after the disappearance of his plane and his companion, he was stubbornly fighting his way northward on foot, hoping merely to find the pole and die there, if he could not live to bring back the word of his conquest. Of such stuff are the heroes of science made.

He recalled the quotation from Kingsley, which Angus Selkirk had recited just before their crash. All about Perseus wandering wearily through "the unshapen land" on "the path which few can tell." Yes, it was like that.

Ninety degrees is the latitude of the North Pole, and each degree of latitude short of that represents about seventy miles of distance.

* According to the indications of the Pickering machine, Eric Redmond was making surprisingly rapid progress northward, and this, in spite of the terribly rough going and his treadmill trudging.

The continual circling of the never-setting sun destroyed all sense of direction and also all sense of time, thus adding greatly to the treadmill nature

of his journey; and this was enhanced by the absolute sameness with which the ice fields stretched on all sides.

For time, Eric consulted his wrist watch; eating, sleeping, and trudging by schedule. For direction, he would line up two prominent ice lumps in the direction which his instrument indicated as northward; and, as he approached the nearer of the two, would add a third beyond the second; and so on, checking his compass points frequently by means of his instrument. Of course, his magnetic compass was useless to indicate the north, pointing, as it did, toward the magnetic pole, which lay southwest of him; but it did supplement the points which he lined up, in keeping him from traveling in a circle.

Thus Eric was able to count off day and night, and to keep track of the speed of his northward progress, in spite of the ever-shining sun and the monotony of the icy wastes.

The second day after the disappearance of Angus and the plane, black clouds again loomed ahead.

"Another storm," thought he.

But the clouds did not approach, nor did any snowflakes begin to litter the air. Eric sang to himself an old Civil War song he had learned as a boy from his father:

"Doan' you see a black cloud risin' over
yonder,
Looks as though there gwine ter be
a storm.
No, you are mistaken. 'Tis de darkies'
banners
And the color ob dere uniforms."

But it wasn't that either. As he drew nearer to it, its appearance became more that of dense black smoke than of a cloud. Could he be approaching a volcanic island? It seemed unlikely, and yet no paradox would surprise him in the frozen north.

Finally he reached the edge of the cloud and found—open water, a wide crack, or "lead," in the ice. The cloud was mist rising from the lead, and

colored by the reflection of the black water below it.

Nothing to do except sit down and wait for a change of wind which would drift the two masses of ice together again.

The wind, however, continued to blow from the south. Eric lay down and rolled himself up in his blankets. But he could not sleep. It was not time to sleep.

AFTER about an hour of waiting it seemed to him that the crack was narrowing. But still the wind continued from the south.

Then he realized that the ice must have broken off somewhere behind him, and that the floe he was on must, for some reason, be drifting northward more rapidly than the floe on the other side of the lead. Yes, the gap really was closing.

Faster and faster the ice came together, and soon Eric had leaped across and was forging northward again.

In the days which followed, he often came to other leads, but all were narrow enough to jump, or were not so long but that he could walk around their ends; except one, across which he ferried himself on a cake of drift ice.

Sometimes he would be present when the lead occurred, the crack suddenly forming within a few yards of him, and once almost directly under-foot. This experience warned him that what happened while he was walking might equally well happen while he slept. Accordingly thereafter, whenever he rolled himself in his blankets, he wrapped himself very loosely, so that he would be able to shake them off with dispatch if he should suddenly awake to find himself precipitated into the icy water.

For food he subsisted on his compressed rations. For drink—in spite of the leads, it was a case of "Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink."

The water of the Arctic Ocean is, of course, salt. But not so the snows that fall on the icy wastes. Eric had with him a small pocket flask, which he would fill with snow from time to time. This flask he carried in his breast, and the heat of his body melted the snow into hard-earned drops of drinking water.

And thus he made his way to the northward.

As the days wore on it amazed him that, in spite of the way his feet seemed to drag more and more slowly, nevertheless, each "day" he covered more and more of the distance between himself and his goal. He had lost his companion and his plane at about 87° latitude.

During the first eight-hour shift of tramping, he had covered fifteen miles. And yet, with every indication that fatigue was slowing him up, he had made the thirty-five miles between 89° and $89^{\circ}30'$ in less than eight hours! At this rate he would be at the pole in another day. He could not understand it. It mystified him.

Then he recollected Cook's discredited story of his polar dash, and the unbelievable speed that he claimed to have made as he neared the pole, unbelievable when compared with his slow rate of travel under identical conditions a bit farther south. He recalled Peary's seemingly equally preposterous story of seventy-six miles a day within two degrees of the pole, as compared with twenty miles a day, and less, below 87° latitude.

Now he himself was actually having the same experience. So perhaps Peary and even Cook did discover the pole after all.

But how to account for this strange phenomenon? Of course, he could not measure the miles that he traveled, except indirectly by measuring the latitude. Could it be that a degree of latitude actually covered fewer and fewer miles the farther north one got? Absurd! And yet how else could one ac-

count for a tired man making thirty-five miles a day over polar ice?

HE had already been puzzled before by one other paradox about the Arctic regions, namely, how much warmer the weather was when the wind was from the north than when it was from the south.

But this truly Einsteinian shortening of distances as one moved north, completely eclipsed that other puzzle.

And this was as nothing compared with the paradoxical phenomena which were soon to crowd upon him.

Dismissing the puzzle from his mind, and accepting his miraculous progress as a gift of the gods, Eric Redmond spread his sleeping bag in the lee of a ledge of rock and turned in for the "night," within half a degree of his goal.

He awoke nine hours later. The only way that he knew that it was nine, rather than twenty-one hours, was that the sun had traversed only a bit more than a third of the horizon while he had slept. Of course, this might mean that he had slept thirty-three hours, but that seemed unlikely.

The wind had changed during the night; and, instead of the cold, numbing blasts from the south, a warm summer breeze from the north now fanned his cheek.

The first thing that he did, after rolling up his pack, was to confirm his astronomical observation of nine hours ago. Yes, he was still at $89^{\circ}30'$ north latitude. This was, of course, to be expected, but he was becoming mistrustful of both time and space in the frozen north.

Then he breakfasted from his almost depleted store of compressed rations, and began what he hoped would be the last lap of his journey; it might well be the last lap of his life, for that matter.

The warm breeze filled him with renewed vigor, so that he pressed on at a faster rate; so much so that, at the end of six hours, his instrument showed him that he was within twelve miles of his goal, within twelve miles of the North Pole!

But here the ice came to an abrupt end. A straight shore of open water slanted away to the northeastward.

This was discouraging; but, nothing daunted, he turned to the right and kept on. After two hours more he stopped. At the rate at which he had been progressing when he struck this polar sea, he should have gone nearly twenty miles along its edges in these two hours.*

Eric Redmond figured on a page of his notebook. So far as he could judge, the shore line was absolutely straight. He had started due northeast from a point within twelve miles of the pole. He had traveled twenty miles. By rights he ought now to be headed southeast at a distance of about sixteen miles from the pole.

But his instrument showed him that he was still headed northeast, and was now only six miles from the pole! He began to think that either God or he must be losing his mind. It was all wrong, but it was apparently leading him to the North Pole.

At this rate, two hours more of walking would bring him to his destination; so, disregarding his schedule, he

* NOTE.—Let the reader take a sheet of paper and make a dot on it to represent the North Pole. Using some convenient unit—say a quarter inch—to represent a mile, let him put another dot twelve miles below the pole, to represent the spot where Eric Redmond came to the northern sea. Then let him draw a straight line twenty miles long, starting in a due northeasterly direction from the last-named point. This line will represent the shore of the sea.

The reader will see that this line attains its most northerly point at a distance of about seven and a half miles from its starting point; and that, at a distance of twenty miles, the line, which had started due northeast, would now be heading just about due southeast.—

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continued his march, full of excitement, determined to reach the pole, even though—as seemed certain—it should be only to die there. Yet it would be some achievement to be the first man at the pole, even though no one but he ever knew of it.

HAPPY thought: perhaps he might be at the pole when Amundsen or Byrd passed over. Either might be expected just about now. They were both square-shooters. Perhaps one of them would bring back word to the world that he had seen a white man standing alone at the apex of the earth. Of course, the identity of the man seen by Byrd or Amundsen would never be known, but actually to be that man would be a distinction somewhat comparable to being the Unknown Soldier of the World War.

Perhaps Editor Giff would realize who this unknown man was and would claim the credit. He hoped so. Giff was entitled to all that he could make out of the situation.

While thinking these thoughts, Eric Redmond came upon a high ice promontory that jutted out to sea. Now it would be possible for him to travel due north again. So he clambered onto the heights.

But he had only got partway aloft on the ice when the wind veered to the south again. A cold blast smote the icy peak. There was a rending noise. The ice beneath his feet shuddered and trembled. A crack appeared at the foot of the cliff beneath him. It was evident that the whole huge peak of ice, under the influence of the wind from the south, was about to separate from the shore and turn into an iceberg.

Instantly realizing the danger, Eric scrambled down the face of the cliff again. So large was the mass of ice that the crack between it and the shore widened but slowly, almost imperceptibly. How fortunate that the shift of wind had come before he had climbed

any higher, for it was quite evident that the crack would still be plenty narrow enough to leap across by the time he reached it.

Now he was almost to it. Only twenty feet more to climb down. And the crack still not more than a yard wide. Eric heaved a sigh of relief.

But his relief proved to be premature, for at this juncture a large polar bear trotted around a corner of the ice and stopped just below him. Eric abruptly ceased his descent and climbed hurriedly to a slightly higher perch. The crack slowly widened.

In desperation the weaponless man broke off several pieces of crusted snow and threw them at the bear to drive it off. But, instead of going away, the bear growled, stood up on its hind legs and clawed at the cliff. Eric discreetly climbed a little higher. This increased the irritation of the bear, which, with a frantic effort, gained the ledge above it, and began a laborious ascent of the ice cliff. Eric climbed still farther.

Although his attention was pretty well taken up with trying to escape from the bear, the young man occasionally glanced toward the ever-widening crack between his iceberg and the shore. It was now evident that, even if he could elude the bear and make his way back to the crack he should never be able to jump it. And so he gave up that thought and devoted all his wits to putting as much space as possible between himself and the oncoming bear.

A fine predicament! Here he was, drifting rapidly northward into the Arctic Ocean, on an iceberg inhabited by an unusually active specimen of *Ursus maritimus*, which appeared to be quite convinced that dinner time had arrived and that Eric was its dinner.

Yet Eric's chief thought, as he scrambled upward, was to hope that he should succeed in eluding the bear in time to set up his instrument and ascertain if, and when, his strange craft crossed the North Pole, toward which

it seemed to be headed. For he was blessed—or cursed—with the true spirit of a scientist.

But the bear was merely blessed—or cursed—with a good appetite.

CHAPTER VII.

AFLOAT WITH A POLAR BEAR.

AS the iceberg floated off lazily, due north, into the polar sea, Eric Redmond scrambled up its face not so lazily. After him, merely a few feet away, climbed the hungry and angry polar bear.

Halfway to the top, Eric came upon a piece of palmetto trunk, a foot thick and some ten feet long, resting on a hook of the ice above him. At the time he was standing on quite a wide ledge. To his left, the face of the ice was cleft by a considerable crevasse, extending deep into the berg. Far below it narrowed sharply; and far above it widened, and divided the berg into two peaks, but where he stood the crack was only about eight feet across. On the other side of this crevasse, directly opposite him, was the mouth of a deep cave worn somehow in the face of the ice cliff.

Without stopping to wonder what a piece of a tropical tree could possibly be doing on an iceberg in the Arctic Ocean, Eric hastily wrenched the log from its perch, thrust it across the gap, and ran nimbly over, just as the bear clawed its way to the ledge on the other side. Snatching the log away, Eric prevented further progress by the bear.

The huge white beast made several ineffectual attempts to reach across with one paw, and once nearly fell off the ledge in doing so; then lay down on the ledge, with its head on its paws like a huge watchdog, or more properly like a cat waiting for a mouse.

Eric, on his side of the crevasse, waited impatiently for his captor to go away. He was no longer afraid that the beast could get at him, for the bear

had already demonstrated the impossibility of that; but what irked him was the thought that here he was, drifting rapidly toward and across the North Pole, with no opportunity of taking an instrument reading. The sun was visible. If he only had brought a sextant he could tell his position by the sun. But all that he possessed was the Pickering star compass, and the stars which it depended on were directly overhead and hence could not be seen from within the cave.

Then it occurred to him that it might be possible to use the star compass as a sextant, if he made some complicated mathematical corrections for the angularity of his tubes. He had learned to take latitude by the sun with a surveyor's transit, while in the army during the World War. Perhaps this machine could be used as a transit, with a little calculation. So he started drawing trigonometrical diagrams on a page of his notebook.

At last he had it! The whole thing was surprisingly simple. But then he remembered that to obtain latitude by transit required certain astronomical data as to the position of the sun, and that he had left his "American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac for 1926" behind in the plane.

Meanwhile the polar bear had evidently been doing some calculating on its own account, and had decided that the way to get to its dinner was to climb down on its side of the crevasse, and then up again on Eric's side. So it proceeded at once to test this theory.

This gave the young man his longed-for chance. Flinging his log once more across the chasm, he rushed over, and was soon setting up and adjusting his instrument.

The sky was clear overhead. With the sun hood covering the ends of the two telescopes and a black cloth covering his head and the eyepiece as if he were a photographer, he could see the faint twinkle of Polaris and Beta Ursæ Minoris in the heavens above him. But

the slight rolling of the iceberg caused the two stars to describe a path like the curlicues on a dollar bill, so that instead of lining up his cross hairs accurately on them, he had to guess at the average position of each, and then line up on that average as best he could. But even so, enough observations would do the trick, and he could make about one a minute with this machine.

HE was still warm from his frantic climb, and so his fingers did not mind the biting south wind. His first observation showed him to be within one minute of latitude—a little over a mile—from the pole. Observation after observation was jotted down in his notebook. They varied greatly, of course, on account of the unstable conditions under which he was working, but their average showed a steady trend to the northward.

At last all the observations showed less than 90° again. He had crossed the pole!

Plotting his results on a page of his notebook and drawing through the dots a smooth average curve, he found that the highest point of this curve just touched 90° at 12.03 P.M. on May 12, 1926. So that was the most probable instant at which he had crossed the North Pole!

"The pole! The pole!" he cried. "I have stood at the north pole of the earth! Perhaps I am the first man ever to have been there. And I am still alive and drifting toward civilization on the other side of the pole. I have a chance to live and return. I'd even get my ten thousand dollars."

He speculated on what he would do with the money. He wondered whether he had actually arrived at the pole before Byrd and Amundsen. It seemed likely, as he had seen neither plane nor dirigible during his tramp northward. He hoped so, for Editor Giff's sake. Good old Giff; he might be peculiar, but he had staked a lot on this expedition and was entitled to his reward.

And what of the others who had contributed to the success of the venture? Where was Angus Selkirk? Had he gone away with the plane and deserted Eric, or had some disaster overwhelmed him? How could he have moved the plane? And where were the four who had drifted away on the ice the day they had saved the plane from the floes in Disco Bay?

Then his thoughts reverted to the pole and to his own triumph. Had there ever been a stranger trip to the apex of the earth? Peary and Cook had claimed to have gone there on foot with dogs and sledges, and Eric's own experience with phenomenal speed—or at least phenomenal change of latitude—led him to believe that both of these men had told the truth. Nansen had tried to float across the pole in the *Fram*, locked in the polar ice. André had attempted it in a balloon. Byrd had flown, or was about to fly, in an airplane. Amundsen had flown, or was about to fly, in a dirigible. But no one before had ever tried it on an iceberg!

Cook had taken only Eskimos with him. Peary had taken four Eskimos and a negro. Nansen had had a whole boatload of assistants. Amundsen had Ellsworth, Nobile and his crew. Byrd had his mechanic, Floyd Bennett. But no one before had ever taken along a ravenous polar bear for a companion.

Eric Redmond's experience was not only unique, it was bizarre in the extreme!

These thoughts brought Eric's mind back to the bear, whom he had completely forgotten during his observations and calculations. The beast had reached the bottom, and was now clawing frantically at the foot of the opposite cliff.

At first Eric thought, quite naturally, that the creature was trying to get a foothold for purposes of climbing up. Well, Eric should worry; for, regardless which side of the crevasse the bear

came up, the man could easily get to the other side in a minute, by means of the log. Furthermore, the ice where the cave was located was quite unscalable anyhow.

But soon it became evident that the bear's intentions were entirely different: it was trying to dig something out of the ice. What this could be, Eric could not imagine. Presently the bear stuck its head into the aperture at which it had been digging, and, gripping something with its jaws, braced its four feet and began straining and yanking, with much twisting of the neck, like a dog trying to wrench a stick out of the hands of its master.

Finally the object, whatever it was, gave way, and the bear sank down on the ice with a sigh of contentment, and began to chew on something with much guttural noise of satisfaction. Eric strained his eyes from his perch above, but could not make out what the delicacy was. What could possibly be frozen in the heart of an iceberg that would afford a satisfying meal for a carnivorous beast?

POLITENESS demanded that Eric eat with his host, even though the host was not polite enough to furnish the meal. So Eric consumed the last remaining bit of his compressed rations, washed down with water from his breast-flask. As there was no snow available to replenish the water, he scraped some ice off the face of the berg with his hunting-knife. Although his ration-tin was now empty, he saved it, as it might come in handy for something.

Then he crawled across the log to his cave, pulled the log after him, wrapped himself tightly in his blanket—there being now no fear of an ice-lead opening beneath him—and went peacefully to sleep, while the gorged bear slept at the foot of the cliff below him.

When he awoke the bear was just hauling another delicious morsel out

of the face of the ice below. Eric watched him enviously and took a swig of water as the bear munched his repast. It was bad enough to be without food one's self, without having to watch some one else enjoy a square meal.

But he felt well and rested; he had crossed the pole and was drifting southward on the other side, and it was a pleasant day. So there was nothing to worry about—yet. That is to say, there was no immediate need to worry for himself. But what of his companions? Had the four men who had floated away in Disco Bay perished on the ice?

Eric had worried a great deal over their fate ever since he and Angus had winged away into the frozen north, for he felt a strong sense of personal guilt about them. If he hadn't been so absolutely obsessed with saving the plane, he would have remembered them, and might have saved them too.

But even more he worried about Angus. Selkirk's disappearance with the plane, during the snowstorm, had been mysterious in the extreme. Sometimes Eric thought that his friend had basely deserted him. But how? At other times he feared that his friend had been overwhelmed by some catastrophe. Perhaps a lead had opened in the ice, had swallowed both man and plane, and then had closed again, leaving no trace. Would he ever know what really had happened?

But no amount of speculating on the fate of his friends would help them any. It was up to him to keep track of his own whereabouts and see whither he himself was drifting. So he crossed the crevasse on his palm-tree bridge and took another reading of the stars. $85^{\circ}13'$! Could it be possible that the iceberg was moving southward at such a rate? Several more observations confirmed this.

Then Eric reflected on the various changes in his situation due to having crossed the pole.

"Let's see," said he, "I was drifting due north; and now, although I am drifting in exactly the same direction as before, I am going due south. It was three minutes past noon when I reached the pole, and therefore at the same instant it became three minutes past midnight when I left it. I was traveling up the 30th meridian from North Greenland, so now I must be traveling down the 150th meridian toward the coast of Siberia. I wish I had a map."

He recalled a bit of scientific fiction which he had read as a child, about some boys who had discovered the pole by means of sledges propelled by a spiked wheel driven by electricity.

The thing about that story which had seemed the most marvelous to him was not the electrical devices recounted, but rather the weathervane which they set up at the exact pole, with an S at the end of each of its four arms, instead of the conventional N, E, S and W. He himself had now stood at the spot where *every* direction was south!

With nothing to do but sleep and eat, and with nothing to eat at that, he whiled away the time by taking frequent observations of the stars, and found that his strange craft was moving southward at the unbelievable rate of a degree of latitude every two hours—thirty-five miles an hour! That is, if he were right as to a degree of latitude up here equaling seventy miles.

AT this rate, the iceberg ought to be plowing through the sea like an ocean liner. Yet it was merely lazily drifting along. For an object seven-eighths submerged to be making such speed would require a perfect gale of wind behind it. Yet the north wind, although fresh, was certainly no gale.

The only possible explanation was a strong running tide. Yet his progress kept up hour after hour, whereas a tide ought to change and run the other

way every twelve hours. It was just one more paradox of the north.

The bear had lost all interest in its marooned prisoner, now that it had found the cache, whatever it was, in the wall of ice. As time wore on, Eric's interest was drawn more and more to this mysterious cache. He wondered if it was anything which he could eat, and if there was any way to get the bear away from it.

And then he had an idea. So he crossed to the ledge and made his way down the cliff. At that moment the bear happened to be asleep.

About halfway down Eric stopped at a convenient pinnacle and hacked off a dozen chunks of ice the size of a cantaloupe. The thought of iced cantaloupe made his mouth water.

Then he heaved a piece of ice at the sleeping bruin. It struck the beast on the head. The bear awakened with a jerk and a growl, and, lumbering to its feet, looked angrily and sleepily around for its assailant.

"Hey there!" sang out Eric, and heaved another lump of ice. The bear looked up just in time to receive this chunk squarely on the end of its snout. Rearing up on its hind legs, it clawed at the foot of the cliff.

Eric barked at it. Imitating a dog had been one of his few parlor accomplishments. This reminder of the yapping huskies, which the Eskimos had sicked on it on more than one occasion on its southern jaunts, did not serve to improve the bear's temper, nor did the rain of missiles which accompanied the barks.

Forgetting all about the buried food, the bear's mind fixed on one thought, to get at its tormentor. So up the face of the ice it clambered once more, and just ahead of it climbed Eric.

The man reached the ledge in safety, with his pursuer but a length and a half behind, and dashed across the tree trunk to the cave. But this time he did not pull in the log.

The bear, upon gaining the ledge, placed one foot gingerly on the end of the log and then hesitated. Eric barked at him from across the 'void, and the bear, throwing discretion to the winds, charged onto the log. He would show this presumptuous cross-breed between an Eskimo and an Eskimo dog that a bear is not to be trifled with with impunity.

But just as the bear was almost upon him, Eric, by a dexterous twist of his foot, loosened the end of the log which rested in the mouth of the cave, and sent both bear and log into the crevasse below.

The bear landed on his back with a dull thud, writhed and quivered for a moment, and then lay still. Its back must have been broken by the fall.

Eric felt a positive loss, and a sense of guilt, as though he had taken the life of an old friend for some utterly selfish end. And yet it had been a question of his life or the bear's. He could not let himself starve to death because of sentimental attachment for a beast that felt no sentimental attachment for him.

But his conscientious scruple over killing the bear was only one of his troubles. There was a matter which he had forgotten to take into consideration: namely, how was he to get out of his cave, now that the log was gone?

CHAPTER VIII.

A TOPSY-TURVY UNIVERSE!

ERIC had sent crashing into the crevasse the log which served as the only possible means for crossing the gap from his cave in the face of the ice-cliff.

He first thought of tearing up his blankets and making a rope. Then, on gaining the bottom, he could skin the bear, and use the pelt to take the place of his blankets. But in the first place the blankets were so light that he doubted if the rope would hold, and in

the second place there was nothing to tie them to.

Then it occurred to him that he could cut handholds and footholds in the face of the cliff, and thus descend by these. But how could he reach below his lower foot, to cut a niche still lower, to place the other foot upon? No, cutting one's way up the face of a wall of ice was all right, but it was quite another matter to try and cut one's way down.

But why not cut his way up? Now that he thought of it, he remembered that he had looked back across the crevasse from the ledge many times, and that the opposite wall had not extended very far above the cave. What lay beyond the top, of course, he could not know, but it was worth trying. He could not stay here and starve. So he took out his knife and dug his way to one side of the cave mouth and then up.

It took him several hours to ascend even the slight distance, but at last he stood on the summit, and was overjoyed to find that from there the ice sloped gently down to the water, and that near sea level a shelf apparently ran clear around to the foot of his crevasse where lay the dead bear and the mysterious cache of the dead bear's food.

Now that he had cut the steps, it would be a simple matter to go back down into the cave and bring up his belongings. But when he looked over the precipitous edge, he was unable to force himself to go down the face of that cliff. So, leaving behind his blankets and his instrument, he ran down the slope to the water and around to the body of the bear.

First he made sure that the bear was dead. And made assurance doubly sure by slitting its throat. Then he turned his attention to the place where the bear had been digging.

To his surprise, there stood, embedded in the ice, and showing through it as through a glass case in a museum,

the body of a colossal elephant. *Elephas primigenius*, the red-haired hairy mammoth of the stone age!

The bear had dug into the ice near one hind leg, which was now entirely eaten as far as the knee, as was some of the meat from the hind quarter. But apart from this, the elephant was complete and perfect. Even its little beady black eye seemed to glare malevolently at Eric through the glass of its case.

Here was fresh elephant meat in abundance, nicely preserved in cold storage. Eric had read of elephants and rhinoceroses being frequently discovered thus embedded in the northern ice, and that Eskimos had used their flesh and found it fresh and good. He even recollected that James Oliver Curwood had reported eating such meat in Alaska, and that Gabriele d'Annunzio had once imported some frozen elephant meat from Siberia for one of his bizarre banquets in Paris.

Eric started hacking away the ice at one shoulder of the elephant, which was nearly exposed. As he worked, he speculated. How did these beasts from the tropics, or at least the temperate zone, come to be frozen in the ice of the Arctic? He knew the conventional scientific explanation: that hundreds of thousands of years ago the polar regions had been much warmer, and that these few specimens had been caught as the temperature changed.

But if that were so, would not the survivors have been driven south? Yet where were they to-day? Furthermore, would not those who were left behind have perished by starvation long before they were caught and frozen in the ice? And yet the carcass before him showed every indication of being fat and well fed.

ONE of two things must have happened: either this beast wandered onto the ice from warm and fertile fields near by, and had fallen into a crevasse, or else there had

been a sudden and cataclysmic drop in temperature which had congealed the elephant where it stood. Neither possibility was consistent with the orthodox theory of a gradual change in the climate of the north.

Then he recalled that some scientists, in reply to such an objection, had countered with the theory that a sudden shifting of the axis of the earth had made poles out of the equator and an equator out of the poles.

But any student of elementary mechanics would realize that such a sudden occurrence would set up such tremendous centrifugal acceleration as to hurl all the elephants off the earth into space, instead of merely freezing them where they stood.

At this stage of his speculation Eric succeeded in digging out the shoulder. He found it covered with long red hair and hide so thick that he could scarcely cut through it. But by persistent labor he finally got it skinned, and sliced off a luscious steak for himself. As he did so he noticed that the little veins under the skin were still filled with fresh blood. This did not look as though the mammoth had been dead for hundreds of thousands of years.

Nor did its flesh taste old, when he had built a fire of chippings from his palm log and had roasted the steak. It was as fresh as lots of beef which he had eaten back home.

The next job was to skin the bear, to take the place of the blankets which he had been forced to leave behind in the cave. But he hated to profane the body of his old friend. And so he undertook the stupendous task of hoisting the palm log up the face of the cliff to the ledge. This required several hours, but it was finally accomplished, although it left him utterly exhausted and trembling like a leaf.

Such was the condition of his nerves that he did not dare to attempt to cross the gulf, or even to put the log across,

lest he drop it once more into the chasm and set all his labor to naught. So he lay down on the ledge and panted for awhile.

At last he felt sufficiently rested to push the log across and to crawl over to his cave. But, once there, he had not the energy to return; so, pulling in his bridge, he rolled himself up in his blankets and fell promptly asleep.

When he awoke it was dark. The sun was below the edge of the horizon. This could not possibly happen at this time of year north of the 73d parallel. Eric looked at the stars. Polaris was nearly a quarter of the way down the sky from the zenith overhead. Rousing himself, Eric took his Pickering telescope over to the edge and sighted it at the pole-star. The reading was 69° latitude!

"Wish I had a map!" he muttered aloud. "From what I can remember, there is no point on the northern coast of Siberia which is as far south as this. Where am I? Where can I be?"

But the only answer was the waves lapping at the foot of the ice.

He took another reading, which only confirmed his previous results. Then he looked at the sky around him. To the southward shone the most brilliant aurora borealis which he had seen on his entire trip.

There had been some fairly beautiful displays of northern lights on the way up Baffin Bay in the Coolidge, but this beat them all. He instinctively felt that he must be nearing the source of that phenomenon.

ALTHOUGH the wind still blew from the north, the air did not feel so cold as it had. That was logical enough, at 69° latitude.

He felt depressed. Alone on an ice-berg at night in a strange and unknown sea. He even wished that the polar bear were alive again for company; but he hoped that the elephant would not come to life again and charge up the face of the ice on his three remain-

ing legs to take vengeance for the steak cut out of his shoulder.

Hastily crawling back across the log, Eric covered himself up in his blankets, head and all. Was he losing his mind? But no, for no amount of light-headedness on his part could cause the sun to set above 73° latitude, nor cause the Pickering instrument to lie about the position of the stars. And with this consoling thought, he fell asleep again.

When he awoke, it was day. The sunlight dispelled some of the mystery and gloom of the night before. So he descended and breakfasted again off of the elephant.

Considerable thawing had taken place during the night, and the head and side of the frozen beast were now exposed. One huge tusk, nine feet or so in length, projected from the ice. The mouth was open, and in it were bits of fresh green grass! This animal could not have been dead a thousand centuries!

Impelled by a sudden curiosity, Eric slit open the beast's belly, and there found an undigested meal of grass, pine-shoots and young pine cones. Surely this elephant must have died quite recently, and died by falling into the ice at the edge of a fertile land, just after an abundant feast. But where, on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, could such a land be located?

After breakfasting, Eric climbed to the cave and brought down his instrument and bedding, for the cave was becoming untenable, due to the melting.

Then he took another observation. Result, 66°! He knew absolutely that the ocean could not extend that far south on the 150th meridian. Yet a comparison of his watch, the direction of the sun, and the direction of the north, indicated that he was actually on that meridian. And a repetition of his observation assured him that he was that far south.

He gazed far off across the sea to the southward. No land, but gathering clouds. And strange to relate,

from behind the clouds shone the aurora. He had never heard of the aurora shining in the daytime. This was the last straw!

So he gave up wondering, and from then on took his observations mechanically and entered them in his notebook, without permitting himself to speculate on what they might really mean.

The clouds which he had seen to the southward were portents of a terrific blizzard, which lasted for several days, during which Eric was forced to subsist on raw frozen meat. Also he had to sleep in the open. But by retiring into the bottom of the crevasse, he was somewhat protected by the two walls of ice, and by the pile of snow which soon choked the entrance.

At last the storm lifted. The wind was still from the north, but not nearly so cold. The snow on the iceberg melted rapidly.

AN observation with the Pickering instrument showed apparently that they had traveled as far south as 45° , somewhere in the interior of China by rights, as near as Eric could figure it out.

And now at night, although he could still see the northern stars quite clearly, no stars at all appeared in the southern part of the sky. Instead, that portion of the sky seemed illuminated very much like the surface of the moon, and gave off a radiance very similar to moonlight.

As the berg traveled southward, this illuminated area increased. It could even be dimly discerned in the daytime. It seemed as though a huge bowl, lighted from the inside, were gradually tipping up from the southward, to cover the earth and shut off the view of the heavens.

Finally it obscured even the sun, and thereafter night and day were both alike, lit by moonlight from this mysterious bowl-edge which now covered the entire southern half of the sky. The

brilliance of the aurora borealis to the southward increased.

And then one day the sun, which had been eclipsed by the bowl, emerged from the horizon due south. Now Eric knew that something must have gone wrong with the universe, for never before had the sun been known to rise in the south.

Just barely visible above the northern horizon hung the pole-star. An observation showed Eric that he must be nearly at the equator.

The days wore on. The ice continued to melt. The elephant carcass fell entirely out of its resting place and began to decompose in the growing warmth until Eric cut it up and hid the pieces in various sheltered cracks in the remaining ice. This was all that saved him from starvation. His palm-log had by now been entirely burned up, and so he was compelled to eat his elephant meat raw.

And all the while the sun hung motionless above the southern horizon, circling not, but merely rising slowly higher in the sky, as the dwindling iceberg drifted southward.

They crossed the equator—that is to say, the north star dipped below the horizon, which fact ought to mean crossing the equator. The red sun rose higher and higher, until at last it stood overhead.

Having reached that position, the sun moved no farther northward, but remained exactly at the zenith. And even with the sun-cap and hood of Eric's instrument, he could no longer see a single star in the heavens even to the northward. The bowl, whatever it was, had at last covered the entire sky. And within it stood this motionless red sun.

There was now nothing to indicate direction any more; although, unless the wind had changed, they must still be going south.

And Eric noticed a strange thing about the horizon. It had no well-defined edge. Instead, it seemed to curve

upward, until it merged with the sky on every side!

Finally land appeared ahead, numbers of small islands, between which they passed. These islands looked green and inviting.

The iceberg had now dwindled to a small cake, and the body of the bear he had killed had long since dropped into the sea.

How many days, or weeks, or months he had been afloat, Eric did not know. Of course he had kept an accurate record, but he was too puzzled and dazed to care to check it up by his notebook.

THE ice-cake continued to shrink. At last it became evident that he would soon have to swim. The water around him felt warm to the touch. Swimming wouldn't be so bad after all.

So the first time that the cake passed near enough to shore, Eric shed the last of his Eskimo outer-garments—he had not needed the hood and blouse for some time, except when sleeping—and, clad only in his doeskin undershirt, belt and knife, plunged into the water and made for land. The Pickering star-compass he left standing on the ice. It would be of no use in a land where there were no stars.

The water was cold, but he reached the beach in safety, a delightful little spot, surrounded by sea and high cliff, and much resembling the bay in northern Greenland which he and Angus had named Palm Beach—ages ago, it seemed. The curve of the cliff to the northward cut off the cold wind.

As he gained the beach, he turned and looked back at the ice-cake which he had just quit, the small cake which once had been a mighty berg. And at the Pickering compass, standing sturdy and alone, where he had left it. It seemed almost like a person to him. It had piloted him to the pole and beyond.

Just then the ice-cake turned over,

and the instrument dived into the sea. It was like losing a friend. Eric almost wept. His last real contact with the past was gone.

Heaving a sigh, he set about examining his surroundings. Then he prepared dinner. He had brought ashore with him some of the elephant meat. Now he gathered wood, built a fire, lit it with the burning-glass which he had used for that purpose throughout the Arctic, and enjoyed the first cooked meal in many days.

Next he set about to get more edibles. In a deep pool near one end of the beach he found some fat fish lazily swimming about. They would afford both sport and food. So with the hinge-pin of his ration-box he fashioned a rude hook, cut a strip of doeskin from his shirt for a line, and with rock-mussels for bait, started in fishing.

This was the life! Though where on earth he was—if on earth at all—he knew not.

As he fished, he wondered what had become of Angus and the plane; and the four men who had drifted away on an ice-cake off the Eskimo village, the day they had just barely saved the crate containing the fuselage; and the mate and the doctor and the four boys whom Angus and he had left behind when they had flown northward; and the good ship Coolidge with the rest of their expedition. Where were each and all of them now?

His reverie was interrupted by one of the fish jumping in the pool below him. Or was it a fish? Those for which he was angling swam away affrighted.

Then another splash. This seemed more like something dropping into the pool.

And then a small pebble struck him on the back of the head. Jumping up, he gazed around him. Another pebble landed at his feet.

He looked up, and there leaning over the top of the cliff was a beautiful blue-

eyed girl, with two long braids of golden-yellow hair!

CHAPTER IX.

ABANDONED.

WHILE Eric, puzzling over the disappearance of Angus, and the strangely contradictory phenomena he had observed, was drifting on his long voyage, the companions whom they had left had searched in vain for them.

Four of the crew of the Coolidge, of course, had been lost from sight when the raft was being saved from the threatening ice-floes. By a happy vagary of the shore currents, the berg on which three of them were marooned, and the ice-cake that supported the fourth, had finally drifted onto the same great expanse of solid floe. Over this the four made their way safely to shore, after great hardships.

This land proved to be the island of Disco, rather than the mainland as they at first believed; and in error they proceeded south rather than north. Eventually, with the assistance of some Eskimos whom they met, they reached the village of Godhavn, from which they were later taken by fishing-boat to Kristianshaab, while the Coolidge still combed the Arctic for them.

The mate, the doctor, and the four boys, who had been left behind at the Eskimo village, when the two explorers took wing for the pole, were much concerned when the pair did not return the following day. For the object of that flight was supposedly just to establish a base and return.

So, as was natural and human, in spite of their strict orders to the contrary, they set out at once with Eskimos and dogs. It took them a week to reach the inland ice, and another week to scale the glacier. But at last they stood on the edge of the glassy watch-crystal dome rising gradually toward the center of Greenland, and

broken only by the *nunataks*, the black rocky mountain-peaks which tower here and there above the otherwise smooth surface. They scanned the ice in every direction, but found no sign of any plane. So they returned sadly, and made their way to Kristianshaab, where their grief was somewhat assuaged by finding, alive and well, the four whom they had thought lost. But none of either party had any word of Eric and Angus.

The Coolidge penetrated to the northward as far as Etah, and had excellent hunting. Late in the summer, it stopped in at Kristianshaab, picking up the survivors. But the Coolidge had no news of Eric and Angus.

On the return of the Coolidge to the States, a brief news item appeared in the papers about two young big-game hunters, lost in a plane in the polar wastes. Perhaps you remember reading it. Then the matter was dropped and forgotten. The crew of the Coolidge were paid off, and Editor Giff pocketed his loss, and said nothing.

CHAPTER X.

THE SKRAELINGS.

ERIC'S frown changed to a smile. Here was company and most charming company at that. Though what she was doing in this weird and God-forsaken land, the Lord only knew.

Glancing hastily at his doeskin garment to see if he were properly clad, and deciding that he was, he called out: "Hullo!"

However he still worried about his thick blond beard. Would not that prejudice the girl against him? But apparently she took it quite for granted, for she smiled back at him.

"Hullo," she repeated with an odd inflection.

"Come on down," shouted Eric. "Or shall I come up?"

But, at that, she looked a bit frightened and bewildered, and shook her head.

"Why not?" asked Eric. "I won't hurt you."

"*Yee forstaar ikka*," she replied, or words to that effect.

So the girl was a Swede, eh? He might have guessed it from those heavenly eyes and that beautiful hair. Luckily he had learned his mother's tongue.

"Are you Swedish?" he asked in that language.

"I do not know what is Swedish," said she, "I am a Viking and a Greenland. And you?"

Her language was like Swedish, and yet it was not quite Swedish. Neither was it Danish, nor even Norwegian. It had a strange accent, and its word-forms and idioms sounded quaint and ancient. Yet he was able, with difficulty, to make it out. And when he replied in Swedish, she could just barely understand him.

"I am recently from Greenland myself," said he.

She laughed and showed two rows of strong white teeth.

"Oh, no," said she. "No one comes from Greenland since the first bishop, Eric Uppri, long, long ago."

"Well, I am an Eric myself," he replied. "And what man has done, that can man do."

An old Teutonic proverb, and Norse as well.

"Welcome, Eric the last," she laughed. "And, that you may know me too, I am Helga Uppri, descended from Eric the First."

"Come on down," invited Redmond again, this time in Swedish.

Helga smiled and rose to her feet. She was clad in a leopard skin, caught daintily across her left shoulder, and hanging down to her knee on the right side. Her right shoulder was bare, as was her left leg to the hip. Her two golden braids hung down in front to below her waist. In spite of her fair hair and blue eyes, her skin was tanned

to a light olive. Although slim, she was sturdy and tall, her height some five feet ten. Altogether she was a veritable Norse goddess, regal in her beauty.

As she stood thus at the brink of the cliff, and as Eric stood below, gazing up admiringly at her, she suddenly lurched backward as though pulled by an unseen hand. Her face went blank with surprise and terror.

"Skraelings!" she shrieked.

Then a swarthy hand was clapped across her mouth from behind, and she tottered backward out of his sight.

"Skraelings" was the Viking word which was used in the sagas of Leif the Lucky and Eric the Red to denote the natives which they found in America, Eskimo and Indian alike. That much Eric knew. But what these skraelings could be doing in this part of Asia, which was where Eric imagined himself to be, he had no idea.

At this moment, however, he was not concerned with the origin of these skraelings, but with the question of where they were bound with their present victim, Helga, and just what they were planning to do with her.

HE hurried to the base of the cliff. As he stood looking for a foothold, a spear whizzed past his head and embedded its point in the ground, where it stood quivering.

Eric glanced quickly up, just in time to dodge a large rock hurled at him from above. Evidently the skraelings had left a rear guard to keep him from surmounting the cliff. So he quickly retreated out of range, taking the spear with him as he ran.

Near the edge of the water was a large, long rock, behind which Eric took shelter. Now he could neither see the top of the cliff, nor could those on the summit see him, and this fact gave him an idea. Dropping quietly into the sea, he submerged and then swam northward under water until he had rounded the promontory which marked

the northern boundary of his little beach.

There he cautiously stuck his head out of the water and reconnoitered. As there were no resulting missiles, he assumed that he had been unobserved, so he approached the foot of the cliffs and started climbing upward.

The ascent was laborious, made even more difficult by the skraeling spear which he still carried. He had trouble finding handholds and footholds, and the sharp rocks tore his feet, tender from long housing in fur-lined boots. But at last he gained the top and thrust his head cautiously over the edge. Thick bushes lay between where he now was and the spot where Helga Uppri had stood. So Eric wormed his way over the top.

So far so good. He now cautiously circled the former position of Helga, until he came upon a path through the woods, leading at right angles away from the cliff.

His first thought was to rush down this path in the direction in which the girl had undoubtedly been carried. But discretion is the better part of valor. Sober second thought convinced him that it would be unwise to leave the rear guard of skraelings between him and the cliff, cutting off his line of retreat to the sea. So he crawled quietly seaward along the path until he came to a little clearing at the cliff-top. Glancing cautiously out, he saw two naked brown bodies, with their backs to him, standing at the edge, bending over, looking down.

The chance was too good to lose. Rising slowly and silently to a crouching position, Eric suddenly launched himself upon them. Giving one a heavy kick, he toppled him over the cliff's edge. But Eric had forgotten his lack of shoes. The kick probably hurt him a good deal worse than it did the native, although the eventual results were more considerably disastrous to the latter.

Involuntarily Eric hopped on one

foot and nursed the other with both hands, dropping his spear to the ground as he did so.

The second skraeling nearly fell over the edge from sheer surprise at the onslaught, but finally recovered his balance and turned to fight. One hand held a spear, but before he could raise it, Eric planted a fist on his jaw, and he went off the cliff to join his fellow.

The visitor picked up his spear and stepped to the brink to take stock of the enemy losses. But just as he did so, a snarling Eskimo face appeared over the edge from below. Evidently one of the rear guard had started to climb down, and, the other two had been watching him, but when these two had gone over, one after the other, the climber had decided to climb back up and see what was the trouble.

He saw quickly enough, although he had scarcely time to figure it all out, for the white man drove a spear-head full into his face, and he, too, went down, clasping the haft in both hands and dragging the spear with him.

Unarmed now, Eric looked over the edge for more trouble, but all that he saw were two still forms on the rocks below, while the third was sitting up moaning, and nursing what was quite evidently a badly broken arm. There were no other skraelings to be seen.

FREED of all menace between himself and the sea, the young man turned to hurry back along the path after Helga. But as he turned, his sore foot stubbed against a loose stone and he pitched forward onto his face. At just this moment a spear whizzed over his head. The rolling stone had saved his life.

Looking up, he saw a naked skraeling rushing at him out of the woods. There was not a moment to lose. Eric staggered to his feet, and faced his adversary; and then, just as the native reached him, he dropped on one knee and clutched the other around the thighs.

The impact carried both of them over the edge; but, as they went, Eric let go of the skraeling and managed to grab hold of some trailing vines, and clung swaying and bumping against the face of the cliff. Like grim death he hung on, until he got his breath and could find lodgment for his feet. Then painfully he hauled himself back to the summit once more.

Again in the little clearing at the top, Eric looked anxiously down to the beach below, after having given a cautious glance behind him to be sure that no more skraelings were emerging from the path. The fourth enemy was lying silent on the beach below, his head bashed against a rock.

For awhile the young man lay on the grass and panted. The wind had turned to the southward, and felt quite balmy and tropical. He was wringing wet with his exertions. The blood pounded in his temples. And directly overhead shone the motionless sun. Altogether, everything was most uncomfortable.

Accordingly, as soon as he could make a go of it, Eric crawled to the shade of the woods, where he again reclined, keeping an eye out down the path for further enemies.

Finally the throbbing stopped, and he was able to breathe naturally again. Taking a long swig of lukewarm water from the flask at his belt, he arose somewhat refreshed and started off along the path toward the interior.

After awhile, he broke into a dog-trot. The path turned and wound, but maintained a general upward course in a direction away from the sea.

There was a monotonous sameness to the path. On and on through the woods it led. Overhead burned the motionless sun. It seemed as though both time and space had come to a dead stop. And yet he knew that he was running, and his wrist watch showed him that time was speeding, too.

The dog-trot did not last very long,

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for his legs were too weak from days of inaction on the iceberg. So he lapsed into a walk, and thus at length came to the edge of a wide plain backed by high cliffs.

Halfway across this plain he discerned a group of figures hurrying toward the cliffs, and after them he set out on a run, his fatigue entirely forgotten.

In fact, he was so engrossed in his pursuit of these figures, that he hardly gave heed to something which otherwise would have interested him immensely, namely the clouds of red pollen which arose into the air as he passed through the plants with which the plain was carpeted. Subconsciously this red pollen recalled something to him, but he was intent on the people ahead of him.

As he neared them, he made out that they were seven, but six of them had black hair, and the seventh yellow. It must be Helga and her captors.

When he came to within a hundred yards of them, they halted and faced about. It was Helga, there could be no doubt of that. Her hands were bound behind her back. Her ankles were shackled together, so that only short steps were possible. And a braided leather rope around her neck was held by one of the skraelings.

The five remaining skraelings now advanced on Eric with menacing spears. He was unarmed. What could he hope to do against five armed savages? Well, at least he could show his chivalry to this defenseless white girl. So he stood his ground.

As they slowly approached, he gathered several round stones from the path, and awaited them. They raised their spears, and he threw his stones at them, but they had no difficulty whatever in dodging the missiles. They did not cast their spears, however. It was evident that they had determined to capture him alive.

And so, at last, they surrounded him

and came on simultaneously from five sides, their spear-points held level with his breast.

The points were only an inch or two away from him, when the warriors stopped their advance, and one of them started in to address him in a guttural language, of which he could make out not a single word, though it sounded much like the Eskimo-talk which he had heard, and which the mate of the Coolidge had from time to time translated to him at the little settlement in Greenland. But how different were these fierce savages from the peaceful friendly Eskimos!

Up to this time Eric had stood motionless amid the advancing braves. Now he turned, as though to reply to the one who was addressing him; and then suddenly thrusting two spears aside, he stepped between them and delivered two blows in rapid succession square in the faces of the two nearest skraelings. As both went down, he grabbed the spear of one, and turned to face the remaining three foes.

His only experience with fencing had been at bayonet-drill in the army, and although he had become fairly expert at that gruesome sport during the World War, he had never engaged three antagonists at once.

Besides, the spears were far lighter than a rifle, and so balanced differently. Step by step he fell back, thrusting, lunging, parrying; trying to stab his assailants, although they seemed to be in no hurry to stab him.

But this unequal conflict could not go on forever. One of their blows fell across the knuckles of his left hand where it grasped the haft of the spear. Instinctively that hand released its hold, and the next instant the haft was seized and wrenched from his grasp.

Drawing his hunting-knife, he flung himself upon them; but one of themwarded off the blow, and, grabbing his wrist, bent his hand over backward, until the knife dropped from his nerveless fingers.

Then they grappled. But the white man was no match for five husky savages—for the other two had by this time recovered from his blows, and were back in the fray. In a few minutes it was all over. One of them held him with his right arm forced up behind his back—"in chancery," as the boys call it—while the four others grinned at him with toothy smiles.

"Curse you!" he shouted.

But they merely continued to smile.

Then his wrists, ankles and neck were bound, as he had seen Helga's, and he was led to her side.

"Helga!" he began.

But a swarthy hand slapped him across the mouth.

"*Ngup!*" peremptorily ordered one of the skraelings.

Helga's eyes filled with pity, and she turned to the chief of the party and addressed him some words in a guttural tongue. He replied, and then she said to Eric:

"He says that you are not to speak unless spoken to. I am to translate whatever he wishes you to know. And this will give us an opportunity for a brief word of planning now and then, for they do not understand our language. Answer me now."

"My life is at your service," he replied.

She smiled sadly, and turning to the chief, said in skraeling language: "He says that he understands."

AFTER that they marched on in silence. Arriving at the cliff, they turned sharp to the left and continued along its base. Eric was boiling with wrath, but Helga smiled at him from time to time, in an attempt at encouragement. There was nothing servile about either of the captives. Eric held up his head like a wild bull, while Helga looked like a Norse goddess.

And thus they marched along. It never got to be any later in the day. The sun hung ever in the exact zenith.

In reply to some command of the chief, addressed to him through Helga, Redmond asked: "How long has the sun been acting this way?"

"What way?" she replied in a puzzled tone.

"Standing in one place in the middle of the sky," he explained.

"It has always been so," said she.

She looked at him with a grieved expression which said plainly: "Now you've gone and wasted one of our few chances to make some plans."

Finally the party reached an encampment. Tents of skin, pitched in a circle about a fire. Great was the jubilation in the camp, as the newcomers arrived, and exhibited their captives.

It was interesting to watch the recounting of the adventures of the scouting party, as they told their tale, accompanied by many gestures. Eric could follow most of it from the gestures, and noted that the two he had hit seemed more proud of their battered jaws than angry. He took it that they considered it quite an accomplishment to capture alive a man who could slug like that.

Runners were dispatched back down the trail, evidently to find out what had become of the four at the beach, and Eric wondered whether they would be as pleased over their three dead comrades and the wounded man as they were of their two bruised faces.

Food was served, a not unpalatable meat stew, of which the captives were given their share. Then all hands crawled into the tents for the "night," although it was still broad noonday. Eric was put in one tent with two guards, and Helga in another tent with two others. They nodded good-night to each other, but neither dared to speak.

Eric's guards were soon snoring volubly, but his bonds irked his wrists so that he could not sleep.

And now, as he tossed and turned and fretted, he permitted his mind to dwell on his peculiar situation. Never,

since the iceberg had started drifting southward with the apparent speed of an ocean-liner, had he dared to speculate very long on the paradoxes of nature, for that way lay madness.

But now that he was firmly on shore, and quite evidently in his right mind, surrounded by other people as real as himself, including a beautiful and stately young goddess, whom he refused to believe to be a mere figment of his imagination, he felt safe in trying to piece events together.

First he decided that all this was real. And then that he couldn't be on the earth. The sun didn't act that way on earth and Helga had assured him that this was no new whimsy on the part of the sun. Furthermore, if the sun was doing anything unusual and peculiar, these superstitious natives would be having a fit about it, instead of accepting things as quite natural.

But, if this wasn't the earth, where was it? And how had he got here?

Then he remembered having read some scientific fiction about the earth being a shell, with lands and oceans on the inside, and a central sun. Perhaps the author of those fantastic tales had built better than he knew.

This was all very well, but, even supposing such a weird state of affairs to be true, how had he arrived there; how had he got through the shell?

Suddenly he sat up with a jerk.

"Eureka!" he shouted.

"Ngup!" ordered one of the startled guards, slapping him across the mouth. Eric subsided.

But his face bore a smile of triumph. He had reached the single solution of every one of his puzzles. The solution was this:

There is no North Pole!

INSTEAD of a north *pole*, there is a north *hole*. Latitude, determined by observation of the sun or stars, depends not on how far you travel, nor on your position relative to the center of the earth, but rather merely on what

direction is "up"—toward the pole star.

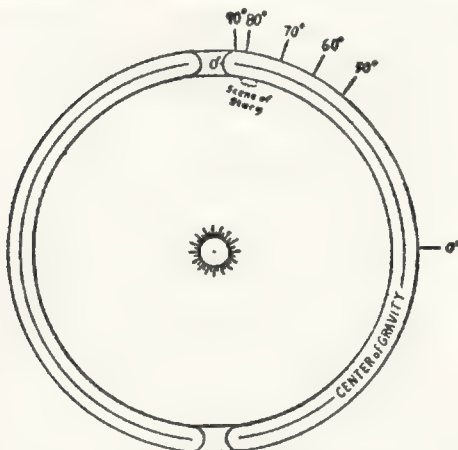
Therefore when he had stood on his iceberg as it drifted over the rounded edge of the polar orifice, "up" had been in the same direction as that of the earth's axis, and therefore his observations had falsely assured him that he was at the non-existent pole.

The rapid curving of the surface of the earth, near this immense hole, accounted for the rapid change of latitude which he and Cook and Peary had wrongly interpreted as indicating great speed of travel.

Probably each of them had been traveling only five or ten miles a day when he had thought it was thirty-five or seventy. They had been traveling latitude, and calling it miles. All three of them had stood at the edge of the polar opening, had seen the north star above them and the sun on the horizon, and had sincerely thought they were at the pole.

But, of the three, Eric Redmond alone had continued on over the edge.

A drift of only a few hundred miles had carried him to a point where the north star was on the horizon, and so he had wrongly assumed that he had drifted to the equator.



"OVER THE EDGE OF THE WORLD"

And how many of the paradoxes and mysteries of the frozen north were

now made clear and reasonable by this discovery! The aurora, whose cause scientists have never been able to agree upon, is merely the rays of the central sun shining through the polar opening. The warmth of the north wind in Greenland was due to its coming from within the earth.

Hither it was that the birds migrated when they flew north to avoid the winter's cold. From here came the mysterious red pollen of the Greenland snows.

Here originated the Eskimo race, as was told in their own traditions. This was the land of the happy Hyperboreans, Ultima Thule, the land beyond the frozen north, the land where the sun never sets.

"Won't this be a scoop for Editor Giff!" he thought. "Even finding the pole would be as nothing, compared with the discovery that there is no pole!"

This, then, was the land where the tropical logs of the Arctic came from, and the frozen mammoths with fresh grass between their teeth.

His thoughts were interrupted by a crashing in the forest near by, and excited shouts of "*Umpnah! Umpnah!*" from the skraelings. His two companions jumped to their feet, awake in a instant, and dashed out of the leather tent. Eric, hobbled though he was, crawled after them.

As he pushed aside the flap, and emerged from the entrance, he saw the cause of all the excitement. An enormous hairy red elephant, like the one which he had found frozen in the iceberg, was charging down upon the camp.

Eric, being unarmed, ducked back into the tent again, but in a moment it was snatched from him, and he was seized by the sinuous trunk and lifted from the ground.

Thought he: "If this is all a dream, then here is the ghost of the beast which I ate while at sea." A bit scrambled, perhaps, but under the circum-

stances he was to be excused for not thinking coherently.

THE mammoth, holding Eric aloft, reared and tramped, as the skraelings surrounded him, jabbing with their spears. Then, heaving the young man off into the bushes, the beast laid about him wildly with hoofs and trunk.

Eric, bruised and torn, extricated himself from the clump into which he had fallen. Looking back, he saw tents being trampled flat, bodies stamped into a pulp, and the few survivors being pursued, seized and either battered against trees or thrown to the ground and stepped on. Eric started to sneak away.

But the elephant, having just disposed of the last skraeling, turned, saw him, and rushed after. Eric ran; but scarcely had he taken a dozen hobbled steps, when the beast was upon him. The snakelike trunk encircled his waist, and he was snatched high in air.

The huge pachyderm paused, as though looking for a tree trunk against which to dash its victim; but, finding none which suited its fancy, swung Eric down, as though to trample him underfoot. Then, evidently changing its mind again, the mighty brute started running off with him back along the path which led to the sea.

Just what was the elephant's plan can never be known. At any rate Eric was carried across the plain where he had fought with the skraelings, and into the forest beyond.

Here, upside-down for the moment—the elephant was not very particular of his comfort—he managed to hook his legs into a trailing creeper, which

hung across the road and thus impeded the beast's progress. Annoyed, the mammoth pushed with all its might. The vine stretched to its utmost; but, just as Eric's legs were about to be forced loose from their hold, the elephant suddenly let go with a snort of pain, and Eric shot backward and upward as in a huge sling.

At the summit of his flight, just before he started falling again, he crashed lightly into the branches of a tree. Pinned though he was, he managed somehow to clasp a projecting branch with his hands behind his back, as he twisted among the foliage, and then got his legs around the trunk.

There he swayed uncertainly for a moment.

Looking down, he saw that the edge of the remains of the ration-tin on his belt was smeared with blood. So that was what had happened! The elephant's trunk, in shifting its position, had been pricked by the sharp tin, and the beast had let go in a moment of pain.

His thoughts were cut short by his late captor's charge at the tree. The first bunt nearly shook him from his perch, but he managed to hang on. Then slowly, like a war tank at an army ordnance demonstration, the elephant pushed the tree over flat. As the top of the tree neared the ground, Eric fell off, scrambled to his feet, and started hobbling through the forest. But the beast saw him and pursued. Head-down and trumpeting, the mammoth charged.

Eric stepped behind a large tree, and the next instant, one of the huge tusks penetrated the tree trunk as though it had been cheese, and struck the young man in the side.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



In the Blood

By DUDLEY HOYS



Ibn Nafa's eyes widened with horror—and sudden avarice

When a Bagdad bazaar trader bargains, let honest men beware—as Bryce learned when he had to deal with greedy Ibn Nafa

HERE'S to it!" said Forsyth, raising his glass. "May the whole affair be signed, sealed, and delivered within the next few days."

Leland Bryce laughed. "Righto! I honestly believe our contract will be accepted; still, I shan't feel quite comfortable until I've fixed up matters with Ibn Nafa over this question of land."

Forsyth nodded, and both men sipped at their gin-slugs, while they watched the sun setting beyond the Tigris. Here, in the courtyard of the Hotel Maude overlooking the river, shadows already held sway, cooling the

stone flags and cloaking the color of apricots and oranges growing in the tiny garden. But on the farther bank the last rays tinted the dust with warm yellow and gave the fringe of palms a metallic glint. Beyond loomed up Zobeide's tomb, a fantastic needle of stone outlined against the evening sky.

"You know," said Forsyth, breaking the silence at last, "Ibn Nafa may prove an awkward customer."

"Oh, I know he's a clever old devil—and supposed to be the richest merchant in Bagdad. Still, it'll be merely a question of bargaining." Bryce's gray eyes were confident.

Forsyth shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. "Quite. A question of bargaining, as you say. But don't be surprised if he names some staggering price. Remember, I've been here twenty years with the Ottoman Bank, and I know a good deal about Ibn Nafa. From what I can gather, a vulture's a generous philanthropist compared with him. He lives and sleeps and thinks nothing but money."

"Very likely. We're prepared to pay well. That strip of the river bank at Hinaidie—"

"Is worth a fortune to the man who owns it," broke in Forsyth. "I don't want to act the dismal Jonah. I'm simply trying to point out that Ibn Nafa holds all the cards. Consider the case. He learns that the authorities here are asking for tenders for the supply of electricity. You come across from Bombay as the representative of the Universal Company. He knows very well they're a wealthy concern. The East believes that everybody in the U. S. A. is a millionaire. He finds that your scheme to obtain power is to erect a dynamo by the bend of the river at Hinaidie—on ground at present owned by him." Forsyth broke off for a moment, to watch a piratical-looking *mahaila* gliding downstream with the current.

"The old man hears every bit of the city's inside information," he continued. "He knows that three other firms are competing for the contract. Also, he's perfectly aware that guarantees and a time-limit are part of the business. So he's in a position to stand out for any price he likes to ask. Incidentally, what offers are you going to make? If it isn't a secret."

"Anything up to five thousand *lira*. Of course, the ground isn't worth a hundred, really. A mere strip of bank covered by palms. But as it happens to be the one spot where the current can be harnessed completely, we're willing to be robbed."

"Well, I hope you persuade him to

accept it," said Forsyth, and again relapsed into silence. For him, twenty years in Bagdad had not worn off the evening charm of the place. He still saw magic in the wide sweep of the river, bordered on the west bank by great white buildings whose revetments and bastions sank sheer into the water. There was still romance in the line of mosques, peacock tiles and golden domes flashing under a cooling sky. The queer tang of dust blended with flower scents lent enchantment to the senses.

"What time are you seeing him tonight?" he asked presently.

"Half past seven."

Forsyth nodded. "He lives in a wonderful house. Seems extraordinary that a man worth millions should go down every day to that dirty little hole of his in the bazaar and haggle over farthings. But it's typical of the race. Haggling's in the blood. He'll accept any old trade that comes his way, providing there's profit." He made a vague gesture. "Beats me how anybody can keep so sharp and miserly in a fairy tale atmosphere of this sort. In Aberdeen, yes; but Bagdad—"

BRYCE thought of Forsyth's words as he reclined in the *bellum* shooting down the river to Ibn Nafa's house. The sun had vanished. The sky was pearl and green. The city seemed to float in a delicate haze, broken only by the high walls of the citadel. Here and there, through arched passages leading to the river, came black-shrouded women to fill their water jars, flagons of fluted copper tapering at the neck. Heads erect, hips swinging, they went back up the slope like figures straight out of the Bible. Others brought white asses to bear away the filled water-skins.

The Tigris itself had turned to dark gold flowing through whispering shadows. From a distant alley rose the forlorn beauty of some youth's love song, rising and falling in a minor key.

It drifted across the water as a sort of response to the *bellum*-owner's chant. He, too, fitted into the charmed unreality. His long pole swinging, he balanced on the edge of the boat as though suspended by a wire.

"Forsyth was right," murmured Bryce, lulled by the dreamy hush. "In this, the mere idea of money seems blasphemous." Then his wide mouth grinned. "But it's no good getting poetic. Poetry never brought the firm fat dividends. My job for the next half hour is to fascinate old Ibn Nafa and get him eating out of my hand."

"Effendi." The boatman steered his *bellum* toward the bank, where a flight of steps rising from the water was blocked by a wall, and pointed to a tall, brass-studded door.

Bryce paid the man and got out. At the first knock the door swung back, revealing the usual flagged courtyard with its vines and pomegranates. The Arab servant seemed to know all about him. He led the way through a stone arch, and drew aside a curtain. Bryce found himself in a room of perfect proportions. There was little decoration. Walls of smooth alabaster, a few Persian silk rugs on the floor, an inlaid coffee table, and a dark purple divan.

"Greetings, Effendi," said a voice, in excellent English. Ibn Nafa came forward, touching his forehead.

Bryce was used to the devious methods of Eastern business, and he made no attempt to speak about the land at Hinaidie. He sampled the sweetmeats of date juice and goats' milk, the thick coffee, talked politely with Ibn Nafa about anything except the one subject that simmered eagerly in his brain. But at last, in his oblique way, the old man spoke of the city's progress. Gradually the gossip reached the business stage.

An hour later Bryce had put all his cards on the table.

"That, you see, is the position. I will be quite frank. That strip of ground is valuable to us, so we're willing to pay more than it's worth. I'm

authorized to make the generous offer of two thousand five hundred *lira*."

The bearded lips smiled. The dark, almond-shaped eyes appeared regretful.

"The land, Effendi, is not for sale."

Bryce rose. "A pity," he said, in a casual manner. "Perhaps you may have different views to-morrow."

"Stay, Effendi." A skinny hand stretched out and rested on his arm. "The night is young."

Bryce sat down again. Time was so vital in this particular contract, he was tempted to forego all bargaining. Until the price of the land had been fixed with Ibn Nafa, he could not send in the estimate.

"I've got to pull it off," he told himself, "and the sooner things are clinched, the better." His chin had become set and purposeful. Leland Bryce had never failed his firm, and the mere prospect of failure could not be borne. Always had he insisted on a personal standard of success that should never fall away. Money was a secondary consideration. Achievement, for its own sake, remained his lodestar.

"Well, make it three thousand, and we'll draw up the agreement at once."

IBN NAFA stroked his brown bur-noose. "Effendi, there is a saying with us that water has many values. Here in Bagdad, the veriest beggar may take all he wishes. To a man dying of thirst in the desert, one cupful is worth its weight in gold. I, too, will be frank. To you, that ground at Hinaidie is as the water to the man in the desert. Therefore, I would not sell it for twenty thousand *lira*. It is business."

Bryce smiled at him for a second, thinking this was mere fantastic bargaining, so beloved to the type. Then, in those curiously deep eyes, he read the truth. Ibn Nafa meant every word he said.

"Twenty thousand *lira*! Absurd!" Once more he got up, outwardly careless, but inwardly troubled by a sudden

sharp anxiety. "At that price, we should more than lose on the contract."

Ibn Nafa showed polite regret. "At less than that price, sale of the land would not be possible. Upstream and downstream of Hinaidie there are ten miles of river bank belonging to me. Are not the banks beautiful now? Should they be sold for a small sum, to be changed into ugliness?"

"But I tell you," said Bryce, "twenty thousand *lira* is utterly out of the question!" He looked gravely at Ibn Nafa. "Surely you love your city? Would you deprive it of progress? For I swear that my company will never pay the amount you ask, and then this supply of electricity cannot be installed."

"There are other firms, Effendi, also anxious to make contracts."

Trying hard to school himself to the pleasant lazy manner of the East, Bryce proceeded to haggle. Twenty thousand, of course, was wildly impossible. It would kill the chances of their estimate stone-dead. Somehow, he must persuade the old vulture to accept at not more than five thousand.

But Ibn Nafa remained adamant. Smooth, oily, he refused to give way. Before another hour had passed, Bryce realized that he was up against commercial blackmail of the most relentless kind. His blood began to warm with a grim, quiet anger. Up to a point, he could admire the man capable of making a good bargain. But sheer robbery of this kind stirred up his fighting spirit.

The gray eyes took on a hard glint. "As this electrical scheme affects the city, the authorities may have a say in the matter. I shall tell them of your determination to prevent our estimate from going forward. Then they may compel you by law to sell that strip of ground at a fixed price."

Ibn Nafa's lips drew back. His expression might have been a smile—or a snarl.

"As you will, Effendi. Permit me

to offer the advice of an old man. Threats are unwise—" His dark eyes showed a tiny gleam of red. "Allah go with you," he added unctuously.

"The wretched old vulture!" thought Bryce, on the way back to the Hotel Maude. "I'll certainly have a word with the authorities about this bare-faced robbery. Wonder what he meant about threats being unwise? Of course, this place isn't exactly a model Quaker village, but what does he imagine he can do?" Here his hands clenched. "Be damned if I'll let a hairy old scoundrel cheat the company out of this contract!"

THE early sun streamed through the open windows, and already the flies had started their unwelcome attentions. Bryce, stretched out under his mosquito net, yawned and blinked open his eyes. As he turned lazily, something cold touched his cheek. The unexpected contact brought him wide awake in the moment. He sat up, staring.

Embedded in the pillow, within a couple of inches of the depression made by his head, was a long knife. He drew it out, felt its keen edge, and gave a little shiver.

"Like a razor! How on earth it was plunged in like that without waking me up—" An uncomfortable icy thrill went through his spine. He could visualize the darkness, himself asleep, and the hand poised above with the gleaming blade.

"I suppose it's a merry warning from Ibn Nafa. I haven't made any other enemies, as far as I know. If I could prove anything, I'd have the old vulture arrested. I suppose he's furious about yesterday's business."

Lighting a cigarette, he nodded. Yesterday, true to his word, he had interviewed an official about that strip of ground at Hinaidie, explaining Ibn Nafa's refusal to sell it except at a blackmailing price. The answer he received was far from satisfactory. By

a cumbrous legal process, he was told, they had power to arbitrate and fix a price. But it would take time. And to Bryce, the next week was urgent. Evidently Ibn Nafa had heard about that interview, and this knife in the pillow was his way of expressing disapproval.

"Charming old gentleman. I think I'll trot along to the bazaar and see him."

When Forsyth heard about the knife, he looked grave.

"That's just like Ibn Nafa, from what I hear. But without proofs, you can't do anything. We know, of course. All the same, I'm afraid there's no way of trapping the blackguard. You could hand the knife over to the gendarmerie, of course, and urge them to get busy and find a clew."

"No, I'll see Ibn Nafa himself first," said Bryce. "He might betray himself somehow."

But any hope he had of tripping the old man was soon disappointed. After a walk through the tortuous alleys of the covered bazaar, past the resounding coppersmith's, where half a dozen half naked men swung their hammers in ringing unison, past the granaries, like elephants' cages, past the *sook-el-Gazareen*, odorous of garlic and decaying meat, he reached that begrimed and shadowed hole where Ibn Nafa traded in anything offered.

The place resembled a glorified pawnshop, though some of the merchandise in it must have been worth a fortune. There were uncut jewels in open trays, and gold filigree ornaments stacked in a careless pile. But no thief dared accept what seemed a providential invitation. The most speedy robber could never get clear of those alleys.

Ibn Nafa came forward and touched his forehead to Bryce. His impassive face held just the right amount of deference and greeting. At the story of the knife he held up his hands in horror.

"Truly, Effendi, there are bad men in the city!"

"There are," said Bryce, and stared at him fixedly. The deep, black eyes never wavered.

"Oh, well." Bryce shrugged his shoulders as if dismissing the matter. "Let's discuss business. I'll pay five thousand *lira* for that ground at Hinaidie. That's my final offer. As the ground's not worth a hundred, you will be a much poorer man if you don't accept it."

Ibn Nafa sighed regretfully. By his manner he might have been breaking some unhappy news to a close friend. "It grieves me deeply, Effendi. By the shrine of Lal Shah Baz! I would give you this land as a token of friendship. But it was a gift to me from my father, and I swore upon the Koran never to sell it below the price he named. I cannot break my oath."

Despite his chagrin, Bryce had to laugh.

"Of all the lovely liars!" he thought. "Very well," he said aloud. "I'm sorry you're so determined to lose money."

IBN NAFA touched his forehead, but the moment that slim, upright figure had turned away, his lips twisted into a gloating leer. "By the beard of the Prophet!" he muttered. "Thou shalt pay more than twenty thousand *lira* for thy interference. That land is more to thy company than water to the dying man."

Prospect of the huge profit to be made kept him almost amiable all day. And it seemed that Kismet meant to continue her favors, for when the searing heat of high noon had passed, and the bazaar was waking up to the second spell of movement and haggling, there came to Ibn Nafa's shop a European.

The old man chuckled to himself. All Europeans were alike. Push up the price four times, let the customer bargain until it had dropped by half, and he would go away believing himself a clever man of business.

Ibn Nafa greeted his customer with a profound salaam.

"Most noble Effendi, behold silverware from Amara, rugs from Ispahan, tables holding the secret only known to the Syrian mosaic workers. Here is a beautiful copper vase from Aleppo, part of the merchandise of a camel caravan which only arrived yesterday. I will sell it at a loss—five *lira*."

The customer smiled. "From Aleppo? Possibly. But originally from Birmingham." Then he leaned forward with a queer, furtive air. "I do not come to buy; I come to sell."

He called out, and in came a Kurdish laborer in skullcap and goatskin tunic, staggering under a load of narrow-necked clay water-jars. The man dumped his load and went.

"What are these worth?" asked the customer.

"Nothing," said Ibn Nafa. "Every beggar woman in the city has a score of them."

"On the contrary, they are worth four *lira* each." The words were said in such a strange way that for once Ibn Nafa's impassive face betrayed his amazement and contempt.

"I cannot buy such rubbish, Effendi."

"I do not ask you to buy. I ask you to sell them. Each jar should fetch four *lira*."

Ibn Nafa stared at his customer. Here, he knew, was some trickery. He scanned the very pale face with its brown eyes and dark mustache, trying to discern the meaning behind it all.

"Four *lira*, Effendi! The greatest fool in Bagdad would scoff at me if I asked a hundredth of the price."

"Maybe. Yet if you refuse to trade, Ibn Nafa, you will be the greatest fool of all. Come, now." The customer glanced around furtively and lowered his voice. "I will leave them with you. If a man should come in to buy one, charge him four *lira*. For each that sells, there is one *lira* for yourself. Is it agreed?"

Ibn Nafa sucked his lips. Of a truth, he told himself, this business savored of madness—or something very hidden and cunning. But he could lose nothing, and if this white stranger spoke the truth—

"It is agreed," said Ibn Nafa, touching his forehead. "What is your name, Effendi?"

"You may call me Smith Effendi. In two or three days will I call again, bringing more jars. By then some of these will have sold." The man turned, and the next second he had disappeared in the bazaar.

"By the tomb of the martyred Hussein!" Ibn Nafa wagged his head in puzzled amazement. "Since when have clay water-jars become treasures?"

Stooping over the heap, he lifted a jar, and found it was heavy out of all proportion to its size.

THE old man's eyes narrowed. He carried the jar into a dark corner, produced a knife, eased out the plug in the tapering neck of the jar, tilted it sideways. Onto the floor clinked a stream of cartridges—bright Lee-Enfield cartridges.

For a moment sheer fright plucked at Ibn Nafa's nerves. His hands shook and he stared about like a hunted animal. Now he understood everything. These cartridges were intended for the tribesmen, who would pay anything for ammunition to fit the service rifles they had stolen in the war or had bought at huge prices from the gun-runners who smuggled looted weapons *via* Afghanistan and sometimes in innocent-looking *dhow*s up the Persian Gulf.

Ammunition meant more to them than gold, for without the correct cartridges of what use were their precious rifles?

The authorities knew this only too well, and came down with an iron hand on smugglers of ammunition. The most drastic penalties were in force against those who chose to run the risk

of breaking the law. Without ammunition rifles were useless, and without rifles sedition stood little chance of hatching.

Ibn Nafa thought of the risk; then he thought of the profit. His thin lips squeezed moistly together. His skinny fingers curved and twined.

"How should any one know the secret? How should any betray me?" Avarice conquered fear. He gathered up the cartridges and poured them back—two hundred—into the jar. A grudging smile of admiration curved his mouth. This Smith Effendi was clever. Doubtless his smuggling had been suspected, and he had adopted this method to shield a trade that brought incredible profit. There were several of his kind in the country, Europeans who came and went and made money by devious and underground means.

"His secret is my secret," said Ibn Nafa. "If I share the risk, I should share the profit." The bearded lips sucked expectantly.

The first customer for a jar arrived before the prayer hour. He was a Malang fakir, in a long black robe with wide sleeves and a huge steel rosary—the fanatical, jihad-preaching sect that wander between Sind and the holy cities of the Euphrates. He paid the four *lira* without a murmur, and carried the jar away under his robe.

Ibn Nafa rubbed his bony hands. Life smiled.

In the next two days seven jars were sold. Some customers seemed ordinary Bagdadis. One was a Bakhtiari tribesman, typical of his "new-caught, sulen people, half devil and half child."

In the shadowy, odorous bazaar Ibn Nafa gloated and pondered. On Smith Effendi's next call he would demand half profits. Later he would ask more. Smith Effendi was helpless.

"To the thirsting man in the desert," muttered the old man, "water is beyond price, and he who possesses water is favored of Kismet."

As he expected, Bryce paid another visit, repeating his offer of five thousand *lira* for the ground at Hinaidie. Ibn Nafa wagged his turbaned head sorrowfully.

"I dare not disobey my dead father's wishes, Effendi. His ghost would rise from the beautiful tomb I built him, near the Bab el Murad, to haunt me in rebuke."

"You refuse the offer?" demanded Bryce grimly.

"It is not within my power to accept, Effendi."

The old man chuckled as he watched that upright figure pass out into the sunlight.

"*Allah il Allah!* He must buy at my price. My fingers hold him, and he knows there is no escape. Profit, profit! Out of humility will I present one *lira* to the holy shrine at Najaf." He raised his hands with the saintly satisfaction of a very generous servant of the Prophet.

THE next morning Smith Effendi paid his second visit. A stolid Kurdish laborer accompanying him brought another load of water-jars.

Ibn Nafa waited until the laborer had gone. Then his hungry lips leered. He stared at Smith Effendi and nodded complacently.

"There has been trade. Eight jars have I sold, and your share of four and twenty *lira* is here." He counted out the money and handed it across. "Truly, the desires of men are strange. What wise man could know that such value was placed upon clay water-jars?" The oblique eyes smiled unpleasantly. "Excellent profit for each, Effendi. Now we will talk of the future."

"What do you mean?" asked the man Smith, frowning.

"One *lira* in four is not large enough to hide pictures of prison. I am only a timid merchant. If I go in danger, I must receive a just reward.

From to-day, Effendi, my share must be one-half."

"Be damned!" roared Smith furiously, taking a step forward. "A jackal and a vulture were mated to produce you, Ibn Nafa! And that jackal was the son of a snake! One *lira* in four is what we arranged, and you won't get any more. Understand?"

Ibn Nafa drew back a little from that threatening figure. Smith Effendi looked dangerous. But avarice was a stimulant to the old man, and besides, what had he to fear?

"My ancestors, Effendi, were honorable merchants. They asked but a fair price in their trade. In this business between us, one-half share for me is a fair price."

"What if I refuse?"

Ibn Nafa made an expressive gesture. Behind his oily voice was a vicious undertone.

"Then the Effendi must take his trading elsewhere. Other merchants might not be so honest. If the nature of the trading became known—"

"You would be arrested, too, remember."

"True," said Ibn Nafa. "Yet, by then, there might remain no proof against an honest merchant except the word of the other prisoner." His lips wore a tiny smile of triumph.

Smith Effendi's fists clenched.

"Very well," he agreed savagely. "But this is final, absolutely final. If you start asking for another increase—"

Ibn Nafa sighed humbly. "Who knows what Allah holds in store for his children?"

"Profit, profit," he muttered when Smith had gone. "The fool! I will take more and more, and he cannot refuse." His mouth champed.

The ninth jar went to a rakish Sagwand tribesman who came in with his quick, silent step, pointed to what he wanted, paid the four *lira*, and never said a word.

As he went out through the doorway, another customer brushed into him. The Sagwand slipped, lost his hold of the jar. It hit the floor with a heavy thud, burst into a dozen pieces, and a clinking stream of cartridges tumbled out.

The Sagwand gave one terrified glance, and tore off through the bazaar. Despite the self-control of his kind, Ibn Nafa let out a hoarse gasp. The newcomer who had brushed into the Sagwand was Bryce.

Bryce raised his eyes from the cartridges and stared at Ibn Nafa. The old man's face had gone gray. He shivered, drew his burnoose closer about him, as if he were cold, and his hands made aimless movements.

"THIS," said Bryce at last, "will be interesting to the gendarmerie."

"Effendi, Effendi, on the Koran I swear I am not guilty! I am a humble merchant. I sold these as water-jars, and no more."

"Ibn Nafa, why be a fool as well as a liar? Are cartridges feathers? Did you never handle that jar and feel its weight?" Bryce's eyes were cold and grim. "This is about the most beastly crime in the catalogue. How many more jars have you here?"

"None, Effendi. None, I swear."

"I don't believe you. Produce them."

Ibn Nafa ran unsteady fingers along his lips. He watched Bryce's face, hard and relentless; and, reading no mercy there, lost the last shred of bluff.

"Here, Effendi," he quavered, pointing to the heap he had piled in a dark corner.

Bryce went to the door, stared up the narrow alley. "I can see a corporal of the gendarmerie," he said, turning back to Ibn Nafa. "I wonder what your sentence will be? Three or four years' imprisonment, I suppose, and a mighty big fine. Well, you deserve it."

In the moments of hot silence that followed Ibn Nafa tasted panic. Imprisonment was bad enough. The prospect of a heavy fine sickened his miserly brain. But worst of all, he thought of the loss of trading. Hag-gling voices, the creak of *gharri* wheels, the chanting of laborers drifted in to him.

"Effendi, Effendi," he burst out, "have mercy! I will be your slave. I am an old man—take pity on me! I have never done you any harm."

"H-m. There was the matter of a knife found sticking in my pillow."

Ibn Nafa forced a sickly, ingratiating smile. "I would not lie to you, Effendi. That knife was placed there as a jest. Had I hated you, would the pillow only have received the knife? Spare me, Effendi, and I will do anything you ask. There is that ground at Hinaidie—"

Bryce's eyes were cold. "Are you daring to suggest bribery?"

"No, Effendi," whined Ibn Nafa. "I would not be foolish. Yet your heart is set on that ground, and if I am imprisoned how am I to sign the contract granting the ground to you?"

Ibn Nafa continued his prayers for mercy, and his talk of the ground at Hinaidie. As a token of friendship, would the Effendi accept it as a gift? He went on pleading until at last Bryce gave a disgusted nod.

"You're a plausible scoundrel. After all, ammunition smuggling is no concern of mine, and there's no pleasure in sending a man to prison, even if he's an old vulture. I don't want the ground at Hinaidie as a gift. I'll pay you two thousand five hundred *lira*—infinitely more than it's worth, but my original offer. Now get those jars of ammunition made up into a load. I'm going to have them dumped into the Tigris."

Five minutes later, with the signed and witnessed contract in his pocket, Bryce paused in the doorway. "You

have been let off this time, Ibn Nafa. I should advise you to be pretty careful in future."

"Effendi, never again will I break the law. I am your slave forever."

The old man touched his forehead humbly, but the moment Bryce had vanished his lips drew back in a snarl of animal fury.

"Curse him! Curse him! May Allah strike him blind! May—" The words choked in his throat. Realization that he was helpless, that he dared not attempt revenge, was the most maddening of all.

Ibn Nafa could have wept.

BACK at the Hotel Maude both Bryce and Forsythe actually were weeping—with laughter. Shanley, an officer of the political service, beheld their uproarious mirth and asked to be let into the joke.

"Bring your glass over here," said Bryce, and then told him about the bargaining over the ground at Hinaidie, and how he had caught Ibn Nafa smuggling ammunition.

Shanley looked grave. "I don't blame you for seizing your chance," he said, "but smuggling ammunition is such a serious matter that—"

"Oh, I shouldn't worry. Those cartridges were harmless. The cordite had been taken out, so even if some outsider had bought a jar—"

"What the dickens are you driving at?" broke in Shanley.

Bryce smiled. "It's very simple. A man named Smith Effendi started this trading with Ibn Nafa." He pointed at Forsyth. "Here you behold Smith, without mustache and make-up."

Shanley gasped. "What!"

"Yes. Shocking fellow, isn't he? And the customers were our two servants, dressed up in all sorts of togs."

"Well, I'm—"

"Don't say it," said Bryce. "It's a rude word." He lifted his glass and beamed. "Here's to ourselves!"

THE END.



"I do not think you'd better come any farther, Anna," Norcross said

Swords Are Out!

Gayly Norcross and his loyal troopers go into battle as Cossacks sweep down and Chinese swords lick out thirstily

By W. WIRT

Author of "War Lord of Many Swordsmen," "Stopping 'Em with Lead," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WHEN John Norcross, secret agent and adventurer, had fought his way across western China and set the Manchu Princess Ch'anyaun and her consort T'ang Wang in power, in their city of Ningyuan, most of his colored troops, who had fought under him in the regular army and loved fighting for its own sake, wanted to stay in the mountain country. So there he left them, under the command of Deacon Yancey.

They ambush and wipe out a Cossack *sotnia* of more than a hundred

men; but they are deceived by the praise of the few survivors, who invite them to feast with other brave Cossack fighters. No ambush is set, but the feasting is all part of a deep-laid plan of revenge, framed up by the Cossack *hetman*, Colonel Lukashka, and Ch'iu, War Lord of Taiyaun and a secret enemy of Ch'anyaun. They plan ultimately to trap and disperse the negro fighters and then take Ningyuan. Both Lukashka and Ch'iu, however, distrust each other and plan to outwit the other in the division of the spoils.

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for May 4.

Ch'iu has another reason for hating Ch'nyaun, for his captive, the Lady Anna Guilaj, has escaped from his power and taken refuge in Ningyuan. Anna, descendant of Magyar princes and Polish nobles, had come down from Siberia to take refuge with Ningyuan nobles of the House of Chou, which owed her late father a debt of gratitude.

The deception of the unsuspecting, childlike negro fighters has reached such a point that T'ang Wang, followed by murderous agents of Ch'iu, hurries to New York to beg the return of Norcross. The gallant adventurer rescues T'ang Wang from the attack of Ch'iu's men, and then summons the remaining leaders of his troops—Yaller Coudray, Delicate Moss, and the rest.

With airplanes and weapons furnished by his wealthy patron, Landess—for whom he first went to western China—Norcross and his men race back with T'ang Wang, to rescue Ch'nyaun from the danger that menaces her city as soon as spring opens the mountain passes.

Just as Norcross is reviewing his hundred-odd men and Ch'nyaun is marshaling her swordsmen, Ch'iu and the Cossack Lukashka, hurried in their plans by Norcross's unexpectedly early arrival, stage a surprise attack on Ningyuan.

They burst the great iron gates that guard the dry watercourses leading into the city—which nestles in an old volcano crater—destroying the defenses with mines and shells. But Norcross's disciplined men are instantly thrown into the breach. He leads part of them, with machine guns, to repulse the Cossacks who had forced one entrance of the city. T'ang Wang's swordsmen beat off another ill-organized assault in a different quarter. And Sergeant Yaller Coudray, with machine gunners, dig in, in improvised "nests," to await the assault on the front gates. They have a double

cobblestone barricade of machine gun nests, hastily completed just at the moment Ch'iu's artillery has wrecked the massive gates.

CHAPTER IX (*Continued*).

AMBUSH.

CH'IU, War Lord of Taiyaun, stood with a group of his nobles about two thousand yards from the gates of the besieged city, their horses held a little way behind them.

Behind him was massed ten thousand swordsmen and lancers. His face was impassive as he watched one regiment file by the little rise on which he stood. This regiment was armed with rifles and bayonets, uniformed, and looked well drilled. It was composed of picked fighting men he had brought from the south, officered by his nobles, and it numbered twelve or fifteen hundred.

They came by him in company front, their rifles at present arms, in perfect alignment. The regiment's colonel stood with Ch'iu.

"You will go into the city," said Ch'iu, "with your regiment. You will proceed to the palace or to wherever the Princess Ch'nyaun is, and take her alive. Her husband, T'ang Wang, will no doubt be dead. If he isn't, send him to join his venerable ancestors on high. The man named Norcross you will also take alive, if possible; his men also."

"I will make an example of them, so that others may hesitate before coming into my land. The Cossacks under their *hetman*, Lukashka, are entering the city from the rear. It is my order to you, O Meng Wu, that there is to be no looting of the city until I arrive and order it."

The eyes of Meng Wu widened a little. "And if the Cossacks do not obey, Lord Ch'iu?"

"If the Cossacks do not obey," answered Ch'iu, his cruel young face immobile, "you are instructed to make

them obey. I will follow close with enough swordsmen and lances to assist you."

The colonel bowed low and mounted his horse. "They will obey—or die, O War Lord of the North."

He rode to the front of his regiment and with it started toward the gates. When within a few hundred yards he dismounted, as did the other mounted officers of his staff, and led the way on foot.

A captain of one of the companies eased over alongside one of his lieutenants.

"I do not like it, Tzu-yu," he said softly. "It is too quiet. These men do not know how the black men can fight, or what their leader can do. I have heard many tales of their fight with the savages and the Cossacks. We go to our deaths in Ningyuan."

"It may be," answered Tzu-yu. "I know not, Lin Fang. This I do know, the Lord Ch'iu had been wiser to send his own swordsmen in first than these outside dogs. I am tired of all this fighting and would rest in my garden, in peace."

"There are many who feel as you do," answered the young captain. "It may be, if we live, that we can arrange, with others— In your place, Tzu-yu! It commences!"

The head of the column, led by the colonel and his staff, who had no idea of serious resistance, had disappeared behind the tangled ruins of the gates. As soon as they were in, the colonel stepped to one side, and two companies passed him.

"To the left!" he shouted to the first company commander. "To the left, then to the right and up the hill."

It was light, on the street, the sun pouring down through natural and artificial openings, and the two companies went jauntily in, their rifles now ready for use, with the bayonets fixed. The first company reached the right angle and turned into it, platoon front.

7 A

As they did, they all saw the stone barricades, and heard a voice shouting something.

It was Yaller Coudray, shouting: "Le's go!"

The response from four machine guns and twenty Springfields literally carpeted the street with dead and wounded. The first company of Ch'iu's regiment suddenly ceased to exist. The one behind it, just turning in, wavered for a moment, then, under snarled orders of the officers, fired a volley that did no harm and charged across the bodies of their comrades.

But they charged into the face of machine gun fire sent to meet them by men who had fought machine guns in France and on the Mexican border—men who could hold a machine gun as close as a rifle and who were unafraid.

To the big colored men it was a welcome diversion from peace and quiet, not a death battle. The second company melted away as had the first. There was a lull for a moment.

"Mah Gawd," said a disappointed voice, "dat can't be all of dem, is it? Ah could lick dat many mahself!"

"Steady!" called Coudray. "Plenty mo' to come! Dem is de 'vance guard, boy."

SEVERAL men of the second company who had not quite turned the corner came running back to where their colonel stood in an attitude that plainly showed his shocked surprise.

"Lord," panted one of them, "around the corner there is—a wall—and many guns. Already they have slain—"

"Out of the way, dog!" snarled the colonel, who was brave, as most Chinese really are when they have to be. They will readily retreat from battle, not because they are afraid, but more on the principle of "he who fights and runs away will live to fight another day."

"I will clear the way!" He drew his sword, running to the head of the next company who stood listening to the cries of the wounded and watching them crawl slowly back.

The colonel, with all his staff, led the regiment up the street and around the corner. It was a brave charge, but a foolhardy one, and it met the fate of all impossible assaults. The machine guns and rifles picked up the first line that came as soon as it got straightened out, before it could fire a gun, and then swept the angle with a sleet of death.

The colonel and his officers went down, and their men with them. Four companies, led by their officers, tried to make the turn, before the rest turned and fled back out beyond the gates.

The angle, and the street to within fifty yards of the first wall, was a bloody shambles, two or three deep in dead and dying men.

Ch'iu's eyes blazed with fury as he saw the beaten regiment debouch from the gates.

"These coolies run! From what? The Cossacks cannot have— Kuo! Hsien!" He summoned two of the commanders of his swordsmen. "Swords! Drive me these curs back to what they are afraid of! Drive them in with the sword! Cut them down if they hesitate! Ching, lead your men forward! Go in after Kuo and Hsien!"

The men of the rifle regiment that were left had no choice. They could go in against the death that lurked around the corner, or they could meet it at the hands of the swordsmen who had closed in behind them. It was death either way for them. One company broke to the left and tried to gain the hills, but were overtaken by a squadron of Ch'iu's lancers and slaughtered.

The rest turned back and charged through the ruins of the gate. It was slower going, the street was crowded

with wounded, and they began using their bayonets to get through, knowing that swords were out, at their backs.

Those who did get to the angle were added to the piles of dead, that was all. It became an impassable jam in the street, Ch'iu's swordsmen cutting and slashing at the rear. Finally they had to stop from sheer want of room. The regiment was no more.

"Out!" shouted one of the leaders of swordsmen. "Out! Give way! Out! We will clear away these dead dogs and then go in!"

The cry was taken up and the swordsmen backed out; that was the only way they could get out, it was so jammed with men.

Ch'iu rode up almost to the ruins.

"Machine gun fire, lord," reported an officer. "From around a bend in the street. The riflemen are all dead and blocking the way. Orders have been given to clear the passage of them, then we will go in."

"Then?" snarled Ch'iu. "With the Cossacks already at the throat of the city! If Shu-yeh has not gone over the edge to hold for me, I am— Tell them to clear it quickly, O little brother, if they wish to live!"

The bodies were pulled and carried out, all that could be reached. Those lying in front of the stone walls made a carpet over which the swordsmen poured as the waves roll up on a beach. They were met by the same careful, accurate, merciless fire, now with a space of time between machine gun bursts.

The dead were so thick that the swordsmen had to crawl up and then over. The rifles took care of them, with once in awhile a round from one of the machine guns.

"Hot damn!" grunted one of the gunners. "Ah'll say dere is some mo' of dem. Ain't got such a hell of a lot of ammunition left either."

"Go an' bite 'em, den," answered his buddy. "What do you care,

monkey-face? Shoot till you can shoot no mo', den take to de bayonet."

CH'IU stood and watched his men go in. He knew that the slowness of the advance meant that they were being stopped and destroyed. "I will send them in," he said grimly to a noble that stood with him, "company after company, until at last they win through. Shu-yeh may soon attack from the rear. It is the black men that are holding, but even they must tire and run out of ammunition. Order two of the big guns brought up. It may be that we can place them inside. They will tear what is stopping us out of the way."

Behind the barricade there was a shout.

"Somepin' comin' up from behind! Somepin' comin' up from behind!" yelled Sergeant Moss. "Ah heahs dem comin'—hosses! Glory be to Gawd an' all His angels, hit's de capt'n! Wid some mo' men! Hot damn, behind 'em comes fo' million of de princess's men!"

Norcross and his men had dismounted and left the horses up a side street. On the way they had met the swordsmen sent by Ch'nyaun. As they neared the wall Norcross stopped and said to the Lady Anna:

"I do not think you'd better come any farther, Anna. See, there is an open doorway where you may stand and watch if you wish."

"I will, John. But you are pale—and your head still bleeds. You can go forward?"

"It was the jouncing around in the saddle, I reckon, that started it again. Yeah, I can go on." He grinned. "I've been hurt a lot worse. Get in the doorway, honey." The last was in English, but the beautiful slim Magyar girl knew that he had called her something endearing, and her dainty little hand again sought and found his for an instant.

Ch'nyaun's swordsmen halted in

the street behind the wall and awaited orders. Norcross passed the rear wall with a smile and a jest to the men, who were now using their rifles. There was a steady stream of Ch'iu's men climbing over the bodies, but they were being taken care of without the machine guns now. As he reached the first wall Lieutenant Coudray joined him.

"Us is holdin' dem, capt'n," he said as he saluted. "But de ammunition is runnin' short."

"I sent some men for some, lieutenant, on the way here. It surely looks as if you were holding them. You birds have done well. We'll let some of the princess's swordsmen through, pretty soon, to play with these gentlemen. It will make it more even. They haven't a chance in the world now—but look at them come over!"

"Us don't need no swordsmen, capt'n," protested Lieutenant Coudray. "Us takes to de bay'net does de capt'n say so."

"You're doing mighty well as you are," chuckled Norcross. "I don't want to lose any more of you than I have to."

The six men who had come with him, the others having been ordered to bring mule loads of ammunition as near the front as possible, came up to the first wall and joined in with their rifles.

"Man, you apes oughta seen us mop up on dem Cossacks," boasted one of the newcomers. "Us kills twenty-eight million of dem."

"What's de mattah heah? Can't you cripples kill a few Chinks widout us havin' to come and help?" said a third.

"Listen, boy, us runs dem Cossacks ragged—way out in de country."

"Dem ain't fightahs, dem Cossacks. Us take de troop and run 'em to hell."

These remarks were met by jeers and scoffs from the men of the barricade.

"Look heah, boy, 'iffen it wasn't fo' de capt'n bein' along wid you-all, dem Cossacks would have run you niggers until dey could play checkahs on youah coat tails."

"Mo' shootin' an' less talkin'!" Yaller Coudray shouted. "What de hell is goin' on heah? Git to work wid dem guns or Ah pulls you outa de line an' puts men in dat can shoot wid a gun, not de mouf."

Norcross laughed. "Hold them for a few minutes, lieutenant. I'll go back and talk to the leader of the swordsmen. He seems to be waiting for me."

"Lord," said the Manchu noble who led the thousand swordsmen of Ch'en-yaun, "these pariah curs will not reach us. Your men stop them all. Let us pass through and we will drive them back to their kennels."

"All right, Chieh-ni," answered Norcross. The young Manchu swordsman had been one of the party with Ch'enyaun when rescued by Norcross a year ago, and could speak English almost as well as T'ang Wang. "If you wish I will open a—" He stopped. The Lady Anna had come up with an old Chinaman in whose doorway she had stood.

"**L**ORD JOHN," she said "this man tells of little tunnels cut through the mountains many years ago, leading up above the gates. They were used to pour burning oil and melted lead down on those who attacked. I thought there must be some, just as in our walled cities, and asked him. He says that his father knew of them. It may be that you could take the little guns up there."

"Do you know of them, Chieh-ni?" asked Norcross.

"No. It must have been long ago, Lord John."

"This man says that he can lead us and show where they started. Of course, it may be that they are caved in, John," said the Lady Anna, stand-

ing there with the Manchu swordsman and the American, with the *pow-pow-pow* of the Springfields and the shouts of Ch'iu's attacking swordsmen on one side, and line after line of hard-faced, grim Chinese, led by Manchu officers, on the other. She stood as relaxed and at ease as she would be in her own drawing-room.

As she stood close to Norcross he sensed the daintiness and fragrance of her lovely body. He knew that her spirit and heart were as dauntless as her body and face were beautiful—and for the first time in his clean-lived life he felt the desire, so strong as to be almost overwhelming, to take her in his arms and hold her close and kiss the exquisite lips and face that were smiling so close to his.

"I would suggest," he said to Chieh-ni, "that you let my men continue to hold them back until we see if there is a place up above where we can mount the machine guns. If there is, we will make the odds less great against you in the open. Tell this man, Anna, that I will go with him to find the tunnels."

"And I also. Please, John." There was a little coaxing tone in her soft voice.

"If you can climb and burrow, with those beautiful robes on, O Lady of the Magyars."

"I? Climb and burrow? I was raised by Altai Tartars, O Lord John. I can climb and burrow—and know swordplay also."

"Come on, then. If we can get two of the guns up there we will surprise Mr. Ch'iu."

CH'IU had ridden back to where his heavy guns were stationed, just back of the little valley made by the horseshoe bend of the foothills a mile away. His guns had been posted so that the range was point-blank at the gates. As his army had closed in between them and the city, the artillery men had placed the guns and had done

it so securely that it was almost impossible to move them.

Ch'iu watched the masses of his best swordsmen milling around the entrance the guns had made, and he realized at last that he was being checked, and his only hope was to get his guns in where they could blow any obstruction out of the way, unless he went around and sent his men over the rim with those of his lieutenants.

But to do that he would have to swing for miles around through the passes and climb several mountains in addition. It would be quicker to advance his guns up and he had ridden to see what was the matter. His presence spurred the men to additional efforts. They knew it was a case of move the guns or die on the spot. As they finally started forward, pulled by horses and shoved by men, Ch'iu heard the sound of gunfire, that seemed to come from the open—and he turned his horse to go back. As he did, a horseman galloped up.

"Lord," he gasped, "they drove us back over the rim! The Lord Shu-yeh is dead, and many more. The black men came, Lord, with the little guns of death—and the swordsmen of Ningyuan were drawn up, waiting for us."

Ch'iu's sword flashed up, and the man's ripped body slipped from the saddle. "Get those guns up quickly!" he commanded an officer of his staff. "I go to—what!" and he stared as if he could not believe his eyes. "The dogs run! Forward!"

He flogged his horse into the route of his men. But it was too late to stop the disorderly retreat of all his swordsmen. The fire of two machine guns bursting from what looked like the bare side of the mountain, the sudden charge of Ch'ienyaun's swordsmen, spewing out of the entrance all of Ch'iu's men who survived in that shambles, and the appearance after the swordsmen of the big colored men who yelled like the savages Ch'iu's men had seen in Nor-

cross's rescue from Taiyaun—it was too much.

Their fear of them overcame their fear of Ch'iu, and they ran. It is contagious, this running, and the regiments on either side of the little valley, held as reserves, ran also. There was need for running, with four machine guns, thirty-odd rifles, and a thousand swordsmen behind them.

The press caught up Ch'iu and swept him along with them back to his big guns. There as the running men parted to clear the guns, he swung his horse and won standing room.

"Let the curs run," he said smoothly to one of his officers that had remained close to him. "I will make this day remembered on some of their bodies. If the—" Two men stumbled out of the crush that was streaming by. They were Ch'iu's spies sent in the hills to the rear to watch the Cossacks.

"Lord," shouted one, coming to Ch'iu's stirrup. "The Cossacks! They were beaten back from the gates! They ride—all of them—to our city of Taiyaun! Ten of their troops led by their colonel! Lord, they boast of taking Taiyaun from you!"

Ch'iu's stirrup caught the man flush on the chin and he fell back, glad it was no worse thing that had happened to him. The bearer of bad news in China is apt to suffer for the first reaction.

"My men run in the right direction," Ch'iu said with a grim, deadly smile to a noble near him. He was not a coward, this young noble that had fought his way to the rulership of a city. "Leave those guns," he shouted. "Forward to Taiyaun! Pass the word that the Cossacks are hurrying there to burn and slay! Never mind these dogs that worry us in the rear. They will be held later in the hills!"

He smiled again as the shouts of his fleeing men began to go up and along the lines. "Now they may run. My war brother Hui from Wu-ch'eng holds my city for me with enough men to keep this Cossack wolf outside. Get

the lancers together and have them make a stand in the lower passes. We will shake off these that pursue and come back, some other day."

CHAPTER X.

INTRIGUE.

THE narrow tunnels that the old man pointed out to Norcross were cut through the solid rock, barely big enough for two men to walk through carrying a caldron. But they were large enough to set a machine gun up, and the little slit was readily enlarged up and down. The guns had been pulled up with ropes, ammunition also, and four of the machine gunners went up, two in each tunnel. Norcross's men had eased over to the sides as far as they could and Ch'nyaun's swordsmen went through, bursting their way into the open outside the walls, just as the machine guns opened up.

The big colored men left at the barricade had looked so wistfully as the swordsmen went by that Norcross sent them along. They ran like unleashed hounds. He and the Lady Anna stood at the ruins of the gates and watched the men of Ch'iu pour out of the little valley in front.

"They flee now," she said, "before men who can fight; but if they had taken the city, John, they would have tortured and slain little children and women."

"That's right," answered Norcross. "Dog-gone it—I wish I had a bugler along. Those scoundrels of mine are running wild. They don't need all that killing, those soldiers of Ch'iu."

The lovely Magyar girl laughed softly. "The Princess Ch'nyaun has told me of you, John. How you can fight and kill—and then be sorry for the wounded, who would kill you if they could."

"It doesn't make any difference what they could do to me," answered Nor-

cross curtly, a frown on his face as he watched the machine guns in action. "I wish to hell and high water—oh, what did you say, Anna? Pardon me, I was still wishing for that bugler."

She smiled, her eyes soft and warm. "You are angry with me because I think they should be killed, these men who came to burn and slay in Ning-yuan?"

"Angry? What about? Every one has his own code and way of looking at things. Your eyes and mine may not see alike, that is all."

The beautiful Magyar girl whose ancestors had been kings and conquerors looked steadily at John Norcross, American, for a moment, her dark gray eyes looking deep into his steel blue ones, then she said gently: "I wish, John, that my eyes—could be taught to see as yours."

"Perhaps they will some day," he answered, with a boyish grin. "They will if I can make it come to pass. We'd better be getting back, I reckon. If those men of mine get too far out they are right likely to get chased all the way home. See, here come more of T'ang Wang's swordsmen."

THERE was no further attempt at any kind of an attack. T'ang

Wang's men, their ranks somewhat thinner, and the colored men, all but four, came back just as it became dark. They had met with stiff resistance in the lower passes, that grew stiffer each minute and they had realized that they couldn't fight all of Ch'iu's army.

Temporary gates were built to replace Ningyuan's shattered defenses and two machine guns and twenty men were left with a strong force of swordsmen at each. On the rim now were machine gun nests, heavily garrisoned besides by T'ang Wang's men. He had met and destroyed all those that had got over the rim and the machine guns and rifles of the colored men had swept it with a fire that others could not pass.

"I think we have things tightened up pretty well," Norcross said to T'ang Wang the next morning as they stood by the gates at the watercourse. The Chinese were busily making the temporary structure secure. Both Norcross and T'ang Wang had been up all night, as had most of the city, securing the gates and the rim, attending to the wounded and dying. Ch'nyaun and the Lady Anna had been finally persuaded to take some rest and now Norcross and T'ang Wang were on their final inspection.

"If we had not been holding that review, O elder brother," answered T'ang Wang, "I think by now that the Princess Ch'nyaun, the Lady Anna, and you and I, with many more, would be on high with our venerable ancestors."

"Sure enough," and Norcross grinned. The cut on his arm had not been a deep one, neither was the one on his head. First aid by Lieutenant Coudray had been effective, aided by Norcross's own clean, hard body and perfect physical health. His arm was in a sling and his head bandaged and a little sore. If he felt pain or weariness, he did not show it. The attack was well-timed—for us. I wonder why Ch'iu and the Cossacks didn't rally their men and try again? Ch'iu must have had all of fifteen thousand men. How many troops has the Cossack, do you know, T'ang Wang?"

"Twelve or fifteen, our spies reported. I do not know why they did not, O honorable elder brother."

Memphis, the lean, gaunt cook of the outfit, who had stayed behind to be "de princess's chef," arrived then, with two Chinese boys proudly bearing thermos bottles and baskets.

"Capt'n, please, suh, I brung you some breakfast, does you want it?" he announced.

"Do we want it? Boy, we don't want anything else but. Hot coffee, T'ang Wang. Memphis, you no-count old scoundrel, you been robbing some chicken roost."

"No, suh, capt'n, dem's mah own chickens, Ah keeps fo' special 'casions," and the big solemn-faced cook, who would fight his weight in wild cats, grinned happily as he saw Norcross and T'ang Wang sit down on some timbers and start to eat.

As they were finishing Corporal Combes and his Afghan wife came up to them.

Norcross and T'ang Wang both rose and bowed. They had been told what she had done at the gate. The explosion had tossed her aside, but had not hurt her, any more than to jar her considerably. Now she stood there with the same scornful smile on her lips.

"If de capt'n pleases," said Corporal Combes at attention, after saluting, "dis is mah wife dat you-all met at de camp."

"It is an honor to meet Mrs. Combes again," answered Norcross gravely. "We know what she did to help save the city, corporal, and we wish to thank her."

The Afghan girl had been taught quite a little English by the corporal, and while she didn't get two-thirds of what Norcross said, especially the "Mrs." part, she knew that both she and her husband, the corporal, were being honored, and the scornful smile changed to a real one.

She put her little brown slender hand, that had grasped a sword hilt so well, on the arm of the big corporal, and her trim graceful body swayed in a little toward him. These two mighty war lords, who commanded many men, were giving them honor. She smiled at them both. The corporal went on, a broad smile on his face: "Yes, suh, capt'n—Sergeant Yancey he say to come to you 'bout livin' quahtahs—dat he don't know, neither do Lieutenant Coudray, where at you wants de married lines."

Norcross turned to T'ang Wang. "I reckon it's up to you. The men will have to bring their wives in. Will you pick out a place?"

"Your men," answered T'ang Wang," and especially Corporal Combes and his wife," here the pure-blooded Manchu prince bowed again to the Afghan girl who had struck a blow to defend his city, "may pick out any quarters in the city they see fit. If the corporal will allow me, I will present to him the home he and Mrs. Combes like and furnish it for him."

"Mah gracious!" said the corporal, forgetting himself for a moment, "does you heah dat, woman? Us gits any house us wants."

"Go ahead and pick one out," said Norcross. "Tell Sergeant Yancey you are to have twenty-four hours' release from duty."

LATER in the day Norcross sat with the Princess Ch'nyaun and Lady Anna and T'ang Wang in the audience room of the palace. Spies sent out the night before had returned and reported that the Cossacks had reached Taiyaun before Ch'iu's men. Taiyaun was a walled city not built like Ningyuan and they had swept up to the gates and walls—only to see them manned by the men of Hui, the ally—"war brother"—of Ch'iu, who poured out a fire of musketry that emptied a score of saddles.

The Cossacks had promptly swerved by and gone into the hills. On their way they had seized and were now occupying the mines of Ch'nyaun.

Ch'iu had arrived at his city and was acting like a maniac, torturing and beheading many of his officers and men. His war brother Hui had withdrawn his men from Taiyaun after trying in vain to stop Ch'iu, who was like a wounded cobra, striking at all in reach. Twice the soldiers and citizens had tried to rebel, only to be crushed with an iron hand. The torturing and slaying went on.

The Lady Anna's lovely face had gone pale and her eyes clouded and misty as the spies told of what was happening to the families of some of

the officers. Norcross saw it and his hand reached out and closed on hers, holding it calmly in sight of all.

Ch'nyaun had dismissed her people, and the four were alone. She seemed, casually and naturally, to have included Lady Anna in their councils as if she belonged to and with Norcross. The Lady Anna, being a woman herself, knew it, but Norcross didn't. All he knew was that he was glad to have her beside him.

"This dog, Ch'iu, who took Tseng's place is rending himself," said Ch'nyaun coldly. "If he continues there will be none left in Taiyuan to fight for him. And this Cossack has my mines and has slain many of the miners and country people."

"We will drive him out of there," answered Norcross with a grim smile. "To-morrow morning—"

One of the palace officers came to the doorway hung with heavy silken curtains and stood waiting permission to enter, after three low bows.

"Enter," Ch'nyaun said.

The official came to the raised dais on which they were sitting. "O princess and ruler of a city, there are four of the men of the Lord Norcross in the reception halls. They have asked to see him."

"A committee," smiled Norcross. "I'll go and—"

"Let them come in here, John. That is, if it is not something they would not want to discuss before us."

"I don't know what it is. I reckon it is about their wives. Have them come in here, if you will, Ch'nyaun. If it is private stuff they will tell me so."

The committee advanced to the dais. Sergeant Yancey, Corporal Howard, the Mobile Kid, and Buck Foster. Their uniforms were spotless, their buttons and shoes glittered, and they were all most distinctly on dress parade.

They marched in with a perfect line and halted at attention, then saluted.

It was evidently a solemn occasion as far as they went.

SERGEANT YANCEY advanced one pace. Norcross rose and returned the salute, as the Princess Ch'anyaun leaned toward the Lady Anna so that she could translate in a low tone.

"All right, sergeant, what is it? Do you want to see me alone?"

"No, suh, capt'n, Ah reckons not. Us don't min' if de princess and Mistah T'ang Wang an'—an' youah lady heahs us."

"Go ahead then, cut her loose. At ease, you men. Relax before you bust!"

The colored men did so and wide grins took the place of the set faces. Like most of their race, they were born with a heaven-sent sense of humor and now they laughed at the strict military attitude they had assumed outside of the palace and carried in with them.

"If de capt'n please, us is worried stiff 'bout ouah wives. Dey is out dare in de hills an' dem Cossacks is liable to kill 'em to 'venge demselves."

"That's right," answered Norcross. "What do you want to do about it?"

"If de capt'n please, us wants to go out and get 'em. If de princess lets—"

"Wait a minute. That is entirely up to the Princess Ch'anyaun and the Lord T'ang Wang."

"Why, of course, John," said Ch'anyaun, her eyes shining. "I will be glad to have them in Ningyuan now."

The big colored men smiled delightedly at her.

"All right, that point is settled. How many are there?" Norcross asked.

"Capt'n, please suh, dare is fifty-fo' of dem an' some relations."

"I see—fifty-four! What was the matter, weren't there enough to go around so all the men could have one?"

"Yessuh, capt'n, dare was plenty, but de rest of de men say dey is gwine to keep on being bach'lahs."

"Oh, that's different. And the fifty-four want to go out and get their wives? Well, I don't blame them, I would myself. Any of those men who were killed yesterday among them?"

"Yessuh, cap'n. Six of dem. Us brings de widdah's in too."

"Fair enough. Well—" Norcross hesitated a moment. It would mean a day's delay in attacking the Cossacks, but if the men knew their wives were safe in Ningyuan they would go ahead with lighter hearts.

"All right," he went on. "How many men want to go?"

"If de capt'n please, de boys say dey will all go."

"No, I want two—four—six, plus two for the waterway gate—I want eight machine gun squads and twenty-five men left here. The rest may go under Lieutenant Coudray. Lieutenant Norton will remain."

"I will send as many swordsmen with them as you wish, John," said T'ang Wang.

"That will be fine. Very good, sergeant. You may start as soon as it gets dark. Get back as quickly as possible. How far is it?"

"'Bout twenty miles back in de hills, Ah reckon. Us can get dare in fo' houahs an' back by mornin'. Capt'n, please, suh, can us take de mules fo' ouah wives to ride?"

"Yes, and you'd better pack plenty of ammunition on them also, boy. If those Cossacks jump you, you'll need it."

"Yessuh, capt'n, us gits dare and back right away," and the committee saluted as one man and retired.

IF the Cossack gets it into his head to attack that bunch of scoundrels going for their wives," said Norcross with a grin as the curtains closed behind the committee, "he will sure get one lovely battle, either coming or going."

"He is clever," the Lady Anna said, "and if he had been with his men yes-

terday he would have driven them on and on."

"You know him?" demanded Ch'nyaun.

"Yes, once he came to the Altai Tartars with a proposal that they join him to make war on some cities to the east. My father refused. Lukashka saw me, and wanted me. I was only fourteen then. He bears scars on his body now that my father put there with his sword," she added calmly.

"He bears?" asked Ch'nyaun. "Did not your father try to kill him?"

"My father fought a duel with him and left him for dead. His men carried him away and he recovered. He is cruel and heartless and will strike at wounded men. Once, before my father fought him, one of the Cossack's *sotnias* rebelled against him and after the rest had conquered them, he impaled those who were left alive."

"You say his men revolted once?" asked Norcross.

"Yes, once he had to flee for his life until his friends came. Why, John?"

"Nothing, only if they have revolted against him he would think it natural that—" He stopped and his eyes tightened a little. The rest sat silently.

"It may be," he went on in a minute or two, with a grin, "that we can do a little high-class framing on the Cossack who strikes at wounded men and impales others. Ch'nyaun, do you suppose he has had spies in Ningyuan, who may be still here?"

"I do not know," answered Ch'nyaun. "He must have had, John. If Ch'iu's men undermined the gates, the Cossack dog must have known about their progress. Some of his slaves are probably Chinese, or his women."

An hour later Norcross sent for Lieutenants Coudray and Norton and the sergeants. There was a long explanation.

As the men walked toward the quar-

ters after Norcross dismissed them, Yaller Coudray said, "Golly! An' Ah thought once Ah was a framah!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE COSSACK CHARGE.

COLONEL LUKASHKA sat in one of the mine houses in the hills, about fifteen miles from Taiyaun. He was farther away from the Thian Shan Mountains and his base encampment, but he had made up his mind to stay as close to Ch'iu's city as possible. His spies had brought him word as to how Ch'iu was acting, and now that he could not take Ningyuan he determined to content himself with the booty in Taiyaun, which he would take as soon as Ch'iu finished killing most of the officers and nobles who had fled.

Several of the Cossack's men were with him, and the table was covered with small kegs and horn drinking cups.

"Ho, little brothers!" he shouted, with a great laugh, "what a day that was! These yellow curs that manned the walls of the dog kennel, Taiyaun. How afraid they looked! If we could only have jumped our horses over the walls! Many of the brothers are cold to-night, but they were riders and died with sword in hand. What better death could be had?"

"None!" shouted the men. "None, O *Hetman*! Soon we will lure into the open those dog brothers that stopped us, and then we will see if they can hold us back!"

The door opened and four Chinese were pushed roughly in by two Cossacks, so roughly that two of them fell to the floor, to be jerked as roughly to their feet.

"Ho!" shouted Lukashka, who had been drinking heavily. "My slaves from Ningyuan! It is time you came, dog brothers! Speak—no, wait, give them a drink, they are exhausted.

Stand forth and translate, you," he bade an officer that spoke Chinese.

The Chinese drank and then one began to talk, the officer repeating it in Russian:

"Yesterday afternoon, just before the sun set, all the black men armed themselves to go somewhere. Mules, machine guns, rifles. They formed at the mouth of the crater in the rear and the gates were already open for them. The white man, their war lord, came up. He ordered them to go back—they refused to go—he tried to make them—and—and then three of the black men stepped from the ranks and fired point-blank at him!"

"What?" yelled Lukashka in unholy glee. "They killed the dog?"

"One of the black men ran to where he lay," went on the Chinese, "and thrust at him several times with the bayonet—then they swept through the gates into the hills. It is true, lord, I saw it! The body of the war lord lay on the ground."

"Ho! They go for their wives, little brothers! And they have killed the dog brother who led them because he was afraid to let them go beyond the city and ordered them back! By Saint Peter, they have played into our hands! We will ride, little brothers. Ho, swords are out! Slash! Kill! Slay! We can reach them by dawn—they will be drunk and asleep! We will teach them to hide in burrows and kill free brothers of the Cossacks! We will ride and impale these black dogs! Mount!"

The Cossacks rode out from the mines and into the hills, over nine hundred of them. They rode fast, not leaving a man; the wounded were bound to their saddles. The spies had got out of Ningyuan after the colored men. The Chinese of the city seemed paralyzed with horror, even the gate guard offering no resistance, all running to stand looking down at Captain John Norcross, who lay with his face to the ground.

If there were any more spies left in

Ningyuan and they had found something else to report, they never reached the Cossacks, who were riding fast on a shorter route. It was just getting light when the *sotnias*, led by Lukashka, came through the last of the hills.

The place the colored men had built for their wives was a small village of huts, set close to the banks of a little stream. There was a cleared space where the huts stood, then heavy timber back to one of the foothills. In front, on the other side of the stream, which was only a few feet wide and shallow, was more timber, but very sparse or thin. This ran for about a thousand feet, ending in a wide open valley which ran up to the main range again to the west.

In front of the thin timber there were several camp fires, one with four figures standing near. Around the other fires lay fifteen or twenty more figures, sprawled out on the ground. Back among the huts were mules, scattered about with no attempt at a picket line.

"BY the cross!" yelled Lukashka, standing in the stirrups, "we have them! See, the dog brothers on guard lie drunk in the snow! There is room for a charge! Form the *sotnias* in battle front so that none may get away!"

There was about a mile of the valley and the Cossacks rode forward in a line that first trotted briskly, then, as they got closer, began to gallop. Their swords were out and their eyes aflame with cruel anticipation of what they would do to these black dogs and the women who had awaited their coming.

Five hundred yards away and the gallop became a charge, led by Lukashka and some of the higher officers. As they came closer, the *hetman's* keen eyes saw that the figures standing by the camp fire never moved, although they were facing the charge. He was riding fast in the battle lust,

but at last his brain realized that they were dummies and that he was caught in an ambush. He raised himself in the saddle and turned to shout an order. As he did, the clear, perfect notes of the bugle rang out, and he knew it was already too late.

The bugle blew, "Commence firing," and the machine guns and rifles opened up from the concealed points in the timber. The mules around the huts vanished as if by magic, and T'ang Wang's swordsmen poured down from the passes in the rear and on the sides of the valley. The *sotnia* led by Lukashka was a little ahead and seemed, in some miraculous manner, to escape the machine gun fire. But the rest were cut off from following them by a wall of steel. The first troop checked their plunging horses almost at the camp fire, uncertain as to whether to go forward or to try to win back to their comrades, who now were being assailed on all sides by T'ang Wang's mounted lancers and foot.

The bugle blew again, "Troop Mount," then "Forward March," and the men at the machine guns and the rifles sent up a wild yell of exultant joy and pride as a troop of cavalry trotted smartly from the rear of the huts. They were mounted on horses furnished by T'ang Wang and armed with sabers found in one of the old armories.

On the right of the line a corporal rode proudly, holding a lance from which fluttered a white pennant with a big yellow "B" in the center. And what made the men yell with double joy was that the troop was led by Captain John Norcross, who was supposed to have been shot and stabbed to death by them.

There were fifty men in the troop, and they rode through the stream, through the sparse timber and reformed again, as calmly as on parade, within one hundred yards of the Cossacks, who sat in their saddles, watching them. The balance of the Cossack

force, cut off from Lukashka, were going down one by one, picked off by the lancers and swordsmen of T'ang Wang, who outnumbered them five to one.

"Ho, little brothers!" shouted Lukashka, "a trap! See—it is to be a duel! Ride over these dogs with me! Then we will take the guns! Slash! Strike! Slay!" and he dug his spurs into his horse.

The Cossack *sotnia*, numbering seventy men, having been one of those that had suffered losses in the waterways, followed him in a direct charge. They were riders, swordsmen, and lived only to fight and feast afterward. As they got in motion, the bugle blew, "Trot, Gallop, Charge!" and the ex-members of the Thirty-First Regular Cavalry, once more in the saddle with sabers, led by their captain himself, rode to meet them.

Sergeant Moss, in his capacity of headquarters sergeant, was this time as close to Norcross as he could ride. The heavy saber in his great hand was light as a yardstick. T'ang Wang had unearthed them from some arms looted from the south years ago, sabers that had been too heavy for his men, used to lighter weapons. The men had spent most of their time while waiting for the Cossacks in putting a razor edge on the sabers, and getting the "feel."

No guns were drawn, although the men had their Colt forty-fives, and many of the Cossacks had their carbines in the saddle boots. It was to be steel to steel.

The Cossacks were to be given a chance to "ride over these black men from America."

Their flanks extended out a little beyond those of Norcross's, and as they closed the noncoms at either flank swung a squad around to meet the overflow, and the rifles in the timber coldly and accurately made the numbers even to a man. The machine guns were still now. They could not

fire to help T'ang Wang, because his men surrounded the Cossacks in the valley.

IN the first contact one of the Cossack officers had outridden Lukashka and engaged Norcross. Coudray and Norton on either side, standing in their stirrups, were already at work.

Lukashka slashed once at a big colored man in front of him, who parried the blow, then was pushed by the press alongside of Delicate Moss, who had already emptied two saddles. Here was no young Manchu for the Cossack to overreach and play with as a cat plays with a mouse, but a big man whose heavy saber met the lightning cut of the Persian tulwar with a parry so hard that it tore the sword from the Cossack's iron hand as if hit by a six-inch shell.

Then Delicate Moss leaned out of the saddle. One immense arm went around the Cossack *hetman*, pinning his arms to his sides and a hand as big as a washboard closed on his throat. He was lifted from the saddle as easily as a babe from the crib. "Come 'ere to me, capt'n want you, Mistah Cossack!" The arm holding him against Delicate's hip seemed to Lukashka to be a boa-constrictor, squeezing his life out—and the throat hold had been far from a gentle one, either. He tried to struggle and release his hands, but he might as well have tried to get out of a bed of set cement:

Delicate backed his horse out of the whirl. "Gimme room! Gimme room! Lemme out of heah till Ah puts mah baby in de cradle!"

The men close to him made way, and Delicate trotted over to where the machine gunners and riflemen were watching the fight. "Take care of dis gent'mum fo' de capt'n," he said, dropping Lukashka like he would a sack of flour. "Ah got to hurry back an' git me a couple of dem Cossacks."

"Dog mah cats," said one of the

circle that surrounded Lukashka as he sat out, "iffen hit ain't ouah ole frien, Mistah Hetman! How does you like dis party us is givin'? Hol' out youah hands to be tied nice, mistah."

Norcross killed the officer who had signaled him out, then, with a back-hand stroke, almost beheaded one of the two who had attacked Yaller Coudray, and met a thrust from the next with a clean parry and deadly point in return. All over the field Cossack fought against trooper, man against man. In five minutes there were more troopers than Cossacks. But it was even combat, those who did not have a Cossack to fight sat in their saddles, as near the combatants as possible, ready to take the place, if necessary, and in the meanwhile giving advice.

"Highah up, boy! Highah up!"

"Don't yo' 'member de manual?"

"Dat's de boy, Slewfoot!"

"Hot damn, Buck! Dat's smackin' him in de right place!"

The Cossacks fought like trapped wolves, but learned, at the cost of their lives, that a Cossack *sotnia* could not ride over cavalry from America. In five more minutes there was not a Cossack left in the saddle. Of Norcross's troop, twelve lay dead on the ground, and, now that the excitement was over, some dozen more were swaying in their saddles. But the ex-members of Troop B of the Regulars had met and destroyed a Cossack *sotnia* in the saddle, saber to sword.

"Get going!" shouted Norcross. "Do your sight-seeing" later on. Lieutenant Norton, get those wounded men back of the lines. Lieutenant Coudray, Sergeant Moss, and you men on the right here come with me—no, hold it! Here comes T'ang Wang and—No—we—are not—needed, I reckon. Get back to—" Norcross would have fallen if not caught in Yaller Coudray's steel-like arms.

"Mah God! Capt'n wounded!" gasped Yaller. "Outta mah way!"

Git dem Red Cross men! Ah carries him! Ah carries him! Git outta mah way."

Norcross was right, the troopers were not needed. The Cossacks, surrounded by lancers and swordsmen led by T'ang Wang and his Manchu nobles, fought grimly to the last. There was a final swirl and flash of blades and lances—and there were none left to fight.

T'ANG WANG and a party of his officers trotted up, across the little stream and to the huts. They were greeted by a solemn, disconsolate group.

"Capt'n's arm raisin' hell," Lieutenant Coudray announced. "Bleedin' again, and he's runnin' a fevah!"

"It may be that I can help him," said T'ang Wang gently, as he dismounted. "I was taught some medicine in England, lieutenant."

"Den hurry, get in dare! Us ain't no doctahs. Us can give fust aid an' dat's all."

"Iffen you can, Mistah T'ang Wang," said a sorrowful voice, "us returns de favah any time."

T'ang Wang administered to Norcross as gently and softly as the hand of a skilled surgeon would, packing the wound in his arm with the antiseptic gauze after washing it. Norcross had regained consciousness once more, and smiled as he drank the fever killing medicine T'ang Wang mixed for him.

"That was a right good fight, T'ang Wang, old-timer," he said, with a weak grin.

"It was," answered T'ang Wang, smiling, "and now you lie still and you are not to talk—as you ordered me in New York."

"I will. Tell those scoundrels of mine that I am all right. I had to chase two-thirds of them out of here," and Norcross eased over in a more comfortable position.

T'ang Wang went out with the news.

The troubled black faces cheered up, and wide, white-toothed grins appeared once more.

"He must have absolute rest and quiet for at least a day," went on T'ang Wang. "One man may go in as nurse and fix those beef cubes and see that he drinks plenty of that cold water."

"Ah does it!"

"You does? Like hell! Ah does hit!"

"Ah'm de best one to go in!"

"Yaller, honest, Ah'm de best. Mah fingers is small an'—"

"Silence!" Yaller commanded. "Ah tends to de mattah mahself. Den Ah picks de ones to spell me—an' it won't be none of de apes dat Ah see 'round heah after Ah counts three either."

In less than half a minute, Yaller stood alone with T'ang Wang.

"Gimme de straight of it," he demanded fiercely.

"I did. Captain Norcross has lost a lot of blood, but with rest and blood-making food, he will be all right in a day."

"Ah takes youah word for it, suh, Mistah T'ang Wang," remembering whom he was addressing. "What to do with dat Cossack what de capt'n wanted took alive? Reckon us holds him till de—"

"What Cossack?"

"Dat one dat was de top cuttah."

"You mean that you have taken Lukashka—alive?"

"Yes, suh, dat's de man. Corporal Moss done took him fo' de capt'n."

T'ang Wang was Manchu to the marrow of his bones. His education in England, his contact with foreigners in Peking, his association with Norcross, whom he loved as an elder brother, all had taught him self-control. But now, the Manchu shone in his eyes.

"Lukashka! And there stands the Lord Ch'ang Chu! This cur killed his brother. We will give him to Ch'ang Chu to play at swords with!"

"Not till de capt'n say so," an-

swered Yaller Coudray, first lieutenant of forty-odd unwounded men, to the leader of five thousand swords.

T'ang Wang looked at him for a moment with the eyes of a Manchu ruler, then as he read that it was a simple statement, not a defiance, they softened and he smiled. "That is what I meant when I said we, lieutenant. Of course, not until Captain Norcross says so."

T'ang Wang sent all but a thousand swordsmen back to Ningyuan with the wounded. Four of the machine gun squads and twenty of the colored men went with them, also all their wounded that could be moved. There was no fear of an attack from Ch'iu, but Yaller Coudray had in mind Norcross's charge. "Take care of the Princess Ch'anyaun for me," and he wasn't taking any chances.

THE next morning Norcross walked slowly out of the hut to an improvised invalid's chair. T'ang Wang stood beside him. His men were lined up in long rows, and in the hills were outposts. The colored men were as close behind Norcross as they could get without encountering Yaller's glare and motion to get back. "Why all the ceremony, T'ang Wang?" asked Norcross, as he sat down.

"There is no ceremony meant, O elder brother. There is a matter that concerns us closely, though. It may be better to wait until we have returned to Ningyuan."

"A matter that concerns you? I am all right—in my head anyway," as a twinge of pain went up his arm.

"It is this. You have the Cossack Lukashka as prisoner."

"That's right, I have. I'd forgotten all about him."

"Ch'ang Chu, come forward," called T'ang Wang.

The younger brother of the Manchu killed in Taiyaun stepped forward on the order.

"Ch'ang Chu has asked, for the honor of the House of Chou, of which he is now the head," said T'ang Wang, formally, "that he be permitted to fight the Cossack *hetman*, Lukashka."

"Why, of course he may fight him," answered Norcross promptly, smiling at the young noble. "But one thing must be agreed upon. If this Cossack fights the Lord Ch'ang Chu, he regains his status as an officer. If he kills the Lord Ch'ang Chu, he must then be escorted to the hills and freed in all honor. Now he is a prisoner, but the moment he takes his sword in his hand he becomes an officer fighting a duel. Is that satisfactory to you, Ch'ang Chu—and to you, T'ang Wang?"

Both the Manchus bowed, and the head of the House of Chou, who looked and was even slimmer and more boyish than his brother, said: "Yes, Lord John, it is satisfactory. I fight this Cossack for the honor of my house. You have cleared the way for me, and the House of Chou will forever be in your debt."

"All right. Lieutenant Coudray, you will bring the Cossack Colonel Lukashka here. First find his sword if you can. Let him go with you and hunt for it."

THE Cossack Lukashka stood calmly in front of Norcross. His sword had been found and now he wore it once more in the scabbard at his belt. His face was impassive and showed no sign of fear. As a matter of fact, he felt none. He knew that his *sotnias* had been wiped out, but he knew also, when he was untied and his sword restored to him, that in some way he was to be given a fighting chance for his life. He stood in front of the man who had tricked him, a smile on his face.

"Do you understand English, colonel?" Norcross asked him curtly.

"Yes—if spoke very slow."

"Very good. I meant to stand you in front of a firing squad in Ningyuan,

but the Manchu noble, Ch'ang Chu, whose brother you killed in Taiyaun, has asked permission to fight you with swords. You are understanding me?"

"Yes, I understand," answered the Cossack, looking down at the calm, blue-eyed American who had decoyed him into a deadly ambush. His eyes showed how much he would have loved to have drawn his sword and cut him down, wounded as he was. But the big colored men were watching him with hostile eyes, their bodies tensed, and he knew that he would not last a second if he made any kind of treacherous move.

"You will fight the Manchu noble, Ch'ang Chu," went on Norcross slowly. T'ang Wang and some of the others who could speak English were translating to the rest. "And if you kill him, you will be escorted to the hills, as far as you wish. If he kills you—I reckon the matter won't interest you any farther."

The Cossack looked at Ch'ang Chu, who had stepped forward, and his eyes widened in surprise. Fight this boy, who was even smaller than his brother? And the way opened for him to the hills, where he could recruit many more *sotnias* and come back, some day? There must be some trick in it. Yet this American did not lie, Lukashka knew it.

"I will fight and kill him," he said, with an evil smile, "as I did his brother."

"That last was unnecessary," answered Norcross. "You are no longer a prisoner, but Colonel Lukashka, of the Cossacks, who fights a duel with the Manchu noble Ch'ang Chu. And I will add—after that last remark of yours—let it be in all honor. If you do anything outside of honorable swordplay, I will give you to the Chinese of Ningyuan to play with, you who have killed their brothers and fathers."

The Cossack opened his mouth to say something, and thought better of it.

He calmly unbuckled his belt, took off his long outside robe, stooped and picked up his sword and unsheathed it. He stood in a silken shirt, riding pants of some kind of tanned skin, and his high Cossack boots from which the spurs had been removed when he was bound.

He was a lithe, impressive figure, this Cossack colonel and he towered over the boyish slim Manchu.

"Go to it," drawled Norcross. "My money is on you, Ch'ang Chu."

"Cut 'em down to youah size, den lick him," said the voice of a very much interested spectator from somewhere in the rear.

"Ain't nothin' in size, kid," encouraged another; "iffen dey was, a cow could catch a rabbit. Go git 'im."

THE Cossack had already taken a step forward and his sword came down in a whistling straight cut. He knew it would be parried, but he was feeling out the strength of the slim wrist against him. It gave readily, but before his blade could disengage, his right arm and the sword had swung far to the side. The Manchu leaped in, his sword an arc of flame. The Cossack jumped back, but a thin red line of blood came out on the silken shirt and widened.

He sprang back in, trying to take advantage of his superior reach and height, his sword like the ceaseless striking of a hawk's beak and talons. But always there was the yielding steel to meet it and at the culmination, to throw it off. Suddenly the Manchu cut again; it was parried, but was followed by a thrust that continued the cut. The Cossack's left shoulder became red also.

"Ho!" he shouted. "A master swordsman! Better than your brother, dog-head! I must end it by—" and his sword began to flow around the Manchu's body. But Ch'ang Chu stood there, untouched. It was such a display of swordsmanship that the mouths

of the big colored men came open and stayed that way.

Then, as if the time had come he had been waiting for, the first feeling of weakness in the wrist of the Cossack that registered as the blades came hilt to hilt, the Manchu attacked. The Cossack stood firm to meet it. He was a swordsman, a master himself, but as the blade that looked as if waving in undulating ripples came against his, he knew that he had at last met a younger and a better swordsman.

He fought with all the skill his years of fighting gave him, he fought with every advantage of his extra reach and height, he fought with his dauntless heart—but even as he did, he knew that he was dead.

The Manchu's sword reached his face, the point of it carrying through after a cut, and it tore through his cheeks—then as Lukashka sliced upward and in from the side, only to feel his sword pushed aside, the Manchu's blade came down through his shoulder blade on the right side, across his chest and through his heart.

The Cossack colonel fell dead, half cut in two.

Ch'ung Chu calmly turned away.

Yaller Coudray, former first sergeant in the Thirty-First Cavalry, and no mean performer with a saber himself, drew a long breath and with all of it said "Hot—damn!" which very much expressed the feeling of the rest.

CHAPTER XII.

WAR'S END.

AN embassy from Taiyaun stood in front of Ch'nyaun, war lord of Ningyuan, and awaited permission to speak.

"You I know, Lin Fang. You also, Tzu-yu. This other, who is he?" she asked coldly.

"O dread war lord of many swordsmen and guns, he is Shu-chi, who speaks for the people of Taiyaun. We

two speak for the nobles and swordsmen, those who are left alive."

"You and Tzu-yu were officers in Ch'iu's regiment with guns that tried to enter my gates; that I know also," answered Ch'nyaun grimly. "Speak, you have my permission."

"It is true we were officers in the rifle regiment, O princess. We were both wounded and taken to a place of safety by our slaves during the retreat. Otherwise we would be dead now—as is Ch'iu."

Ch'nyaun needed all her Manchu poise to conceal her surprise at this news. "Who killed him?"

"We did," answered the young Chinese officer, calmly. "He became as a devil. We rose against him and with the aid of the people we sent him on high to join his venerable ancestors."

"Who holds the city?"

"We do, with the people. This is our mission, O princess who rules wisely and well. We come to ask you to rule over Taiyaun also. We are weary to the heart of fighting always, and would rest in our gardens."

"I? Rule over Taiyaun? I will put it to the—" But as Ch'nyaun leaned a little forward, she could see the faint little hint of a smile on Norcross's face, as he sat beside T'ang Wang—and she realized that her honorable elder brother was smiling inwardly at her display of hot temper.

"On what terms?" she finished more calmly, and as her midnight black eyes caught and held the blue ones of Norcross for a moment, her perfect lips curved upward a little.

"Taiyaun is yours—to do with as you will—even as you rule here in Ningyuan where there is always justice shown, and peace."

"Unless attacked by curs from the wastelands and from Taiyaun," said Ch'nyaun curtly. "T'ang Wang, give counsel—and you, elder brother."

"Our honorable elder brother first," answered T'ang Wang, in English.

"Well, suh," said Norcross in Eng-

lish, "I reckon it's a right good idea. The two cities are only thirty miles apart. The Princess Ch'nyaun can send some of her nobles over there to take charge with these men who want to rest. The people there are the same as the people here; it is the would-be war lords who cause trouble. I am very much in favor of it, princess."

"You, T'ang Wang?" demanded Ch'nyaun.

"I feel as the Lord John. It will enable us to work the mines on both sides, and to present a much stronger front to any that come against us in the future. Together we can command all passes through the hills."

Ch'nyaun spoke in Chinese to the embassy. "I will take and hold the city of Taiyaun, then. My nobles will go to smooth matters out. Then you may choose among you who is to rule—under my orders," she added regally.

The embassy bowed very low. "You give our hearts peace, O Lord of Ningyuan and Taiyaun," Lin Fang said. "Will you deign to mention which of your nobles shall go?"

"Name them, lord of the swordsmen," said Ch'nyaun to T'ang Wang. His keen eyes went over the group of Manchu nobles who stood on the right side. "Ch'ang Chu of the House of Chou; and K'ung Chen, of the House of Yin."

The two young men came before the dais and bowed.

"You will go to Taiyaun with five hundred swordsmen as a guard of honor. You will work with these ambassadors and the others to bring the city to peace and quiet. You will hold it for the Princess Ch'nyaun."

They bowed again, their boyish faces calm, but their eyes shining at the honor bestowed upon them.

"You have my permission to depart," announced Ch'nyaun, and the audience was ended. As the great room emptied of swordsmen and nobles, she turned to Norcross, who stood with the Lady Anna.

"You will come with us, John? You and the Lady Anna?"

"We are going to the gardens, O princess of cities. See, the sun shines and it is warm. We go to see the swans on the lake."

Ch'nyaun smiled. "We will join you soon; take care of my sister for me, Lord John."

"I will," answered Norcross cheerily. Ch'nyaun gave a happy little laugh as she looked for a moment at the lovely Magyar girl standing at Norcross's side.

AS the two walked down the winding stone steps leading to the artificial lake, the Lady Anna saw his lips tighten a little.

"John! Your lips grew tight, as if you felt pain. You are all right?"

"Yes, I am all right. If my lips tightened it was not from pain, honey. I was just thinking how to fortify a place and get the guns up, I reckon. I ought to be all right, with you nursing me for three weeks as you have done, Lady of the Magyars."

They reached a low stone bench by the lake and sat down.

"I ought to be right ashamed of myself," he went on, "playing off sick that way. But I like to have you—fussing around," he finished with a smile.

The girl's pretty lips curved enchantingly and her eyes grew darker. "John, you speak of fortifying a place. You mean Taiyaun?"

"Taiyaun? No, Anna—I reckon I was day-dreaming. On the way back to Ningyuan I passed a place on this side of the mountains, in Chinese territory. You see, Anna, the big hills come marching down, then open, and there is one alone, higher than the rest. Down the side tumbles a little stream and at the top great rocks make what looks like a turreted castle."

"I know, John," she nodded her head, her eyes wistful. "There are some like that in the Altai Mountains.

Castles that look as if they were built by the heroes of old."

"Well," continued Norcross, looking like a boy at play, "I reckon I was building a dream city up there on the top and was framing how to get the French seventy-fives up there, when my lips grew tight. They always do when I try to figure. That's a place I've always dreamed about."

"But, John, you are from a land far away. Your people, and—" The gray-blue eyes widened and grew troubled. "John, the Princess Ch'enyaun did not tell me—you—you are married, John?"

"No, suh! Why, Anna, I haven't even a girl, back there. I was in the army and after I came out I've chased all over the world for so long that I reckon I never had time to do any courting. My people are all dead, Anna. I am alone, honey."

"As I am, John."

"Yes, as you are. These people in the south to whom you were going, are they your people?"

"They are distant relations of my father. I do not want to go to them, John. They live in a great city, and I do not like cities where the people crowd together like sheep. Once my father many years ago took me with him to Petrograd and then again to Peking. I—I hate them, John, and want my mountains always."

"My goodness," teased Norcross, "I didn't know you were such a traveled young lady."

"I am," the Lady Anna answered, gravely, "and I do not like it. Tell me more of your dream city, John."

"I don't reckon I can at the minute," answered Norcross in a tone he tried hard to make sad. "I'm feeling right bad."

"John!" She came lightly to her feet. "Your arm! It *does* hurt you, then?"

"It isn't that way that I feel bad," Norcross rose and took her little hands in his lean browned ones. "It is be-

cause I love you and I reckoned you might go back to the States with me if you loved me. You tell me now that you don't like to travel and—"

"You—you love me, John?" Her exquisite body swayed toward him and her lovely face, the gray-blue eyes dark, told him what he wanted to know, even before the dainty lips said, "I love you, also, John. Where you go, there will I go, always."

Norcross took her in his arms and his lips found hers. The maidens and the swordsmen of her bodyguard, back among the flower beds, smiled happily as they saw the arms of their lady go up and around the neck of the American war lord, and a maiden said: "See, the Lady Anna and the Lord John love each other. Now there will be many feasts and a wedding."

"He is a war lord second only to T'ang Wang and the Prince Ch'ang Chu," said a young swordsman, "and his men are fighting men. It is an honor to fight beside them."

As they sat down again on the stone bench, the Lady Anna asked, her lips still tremulous from his kiss: "We go to that land of yours, John?"

"Honey, I can't think of a thing except that you love me. I don't have to go. Would you like to build a city with me on the mountain and rule over those darn scoundrels of mine and their wives? I reckon they'd come with me and I can send back to the States and get a lot more. I have plenty of money, sugar-child, and if you will, I won't go away any more for any one, unless you want to come along."

"John! You will build my city for me? And you do not need to go away?" Her firm velvety cheek came to his. "I love you, John. You are lord of me, always."

Norcross kissed her. "Honey, I am not lord of you. I am just your man."

"Yes," whispered the Lady Anna, descendant of a race of kings, "that is it. You are—my man, forever."

THE END.



Gorilla was mad with all the accumulated madness of dragging days of torture

Gambler's Luck

When two men, cast away on a tiny South Seas isle, are as different as Carlton, the gambler, and Gorilla McGuire, brute slugger, no island is large enough to hold them peacefully

By RULAND V. E. WALTNER

ON the northern rim of Little Ute island that lay bleak and uninhabited almost midway between Honolulu and Sydney, the two survivors of the Southern Star had hoisted their signal of distress. This signal was Carlton's shirt, tied firmly by the sleeves to the top of the tallest tree whose crest they had hacked bare with their knives.

From a sheer rock wall, the island rose to a wooded ridge and fell away to the south, shutting off the long beach of limestone, sand, and shell. Through this part of the island ran the stream of fresh water that Carlton had christened the Stream of Life, for the mussels

that lined it not only gave up the tough, little animals that were their food; but now and then they carried pearls of unusual size and luster.

Both men wore at their belts small bags from which the last grains of tobacco had long since disappeared. With grim lips, Carlton added to his store of pearls, and gradually the sides of his bag swelled; with profane disgust at their uselessness in such an exile, Gorilla McGuire dropped his scant findings into his.

For perhaps the millionth time, Carlton bent from his place on the bank, wrenched loose an unusually large and irregularly shaped mussel, inserted the

thin blade of his knife between the shells and severed the adductor muscles.

"You been picking tough ones all morning," the prize-fighter exclaimed. "Me, I pick straight edges so I get my knife in easy. Looks like maybe you ain't so smart, spite of your speed with the cards and all the men you've skinned."

Carlton ignored the unfair gibe as he had ignored so many things in the weeks past.

"I've begun to suspect that the misshaped ones are more apt to have pearls; and they're just as good eating." He smiled wryly as he laid the shell open and lifted the tendinous bit on the point of his knife. "Or maybe I'd better say as bad eating."

An oath broke from Gorilla's thick lips; and he bent greedily over Carlton's shell. From the folds of the mantle that incased the mussel, a pearl had rolled, pink, delicately textured, with a perfect skin and a fine orient.

"You crook!" he muttered hoarsely. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It just occurred to me."

"Looks like it," the other snarled. "Your sack is better than half full and mine ain't got much more than the bottom covered."

Carlton's jaw tightened. He, too, felt a surge of hatred for his companion, hatred that grew naturally out of their long, enforced association, intensified a thousand times by the difference in their temperaments, by their hunger and chill. But he answered, almost gently: "They won't do us much good, Gorilla. We can't wear them or eat them."

"Ye-ah," the other growled, "but back in New York that one pearl would get us lots of beefsteak and onions and coffee. And we could have hot biscuits and honey and pie and prime ribs; and if you want something fancy—ever eat Tony's lobsters?" A sudden look of abject misery swept over his leathery face. "But hell! I won't ever be able to eat lobster again after eating all these

slimy little shellfish. Bet I couldn't even stomach an oyster stew."

OF late, Gorilla's world was made up of meats and pies and a few valiant vegetables. In Carlton's, too, food had taken on an unprecedented value. He slid the mussel into his mouth and began to chew, stoically.

"We'll get home some day," he muttered. "Then our appetites will come back."

"Don't want no more appetite than I got," Gorilla answered as he bent for another shell. "But we'll never get back."

"Oh, I don't know." Carlton spoke casually, as he fumbled at his pearl sack. "There was a storm last night. There's still some wind. It may bring us something yet."

"Nothing but a chill! I shivered all night. That wind was awful."

The pearl glowed warmly as it slipped from the shell into Carlton's hand; and Gorilla's pale gaze answered. Tentatively, his thumb ran over the slim blade of his knife. His eyes rose to Carlton's sunburned throat; viciously he thrust his blade between the shells.

"You got all the luck," he swore as he threw the empty mussel aside. "No wonder there ain't none left for me."

Carlton smiled, his lips tighter. Gorilla's dislike had never been so outspoken.

"You've forgotten," he said slowly, the sack unopened in his hand, "how lucky you are not to be with the others at the bottom of the sea."

"I'd as soon be there," Gorilla stormed, "as drinking mussels and watching you pocket pearls. It's getting on my nerves. The time's coming when I ain't going to stand it."

Again that tentative thumb passed over the edge of the slim knife; again resentful eyes fastened on Carlton's throat.

Still the sack lay in Carlton's palm, still he fingered its half distended sides thoughtfully.

"I tell you," Gorilla repeated, a note of hysteria threading his voice, "you ain't got no right to all the luck. If I'd known what was going to happen when Cap Donovan told me he'd give me free passage to Sydney to fight that Spaniard, Spativa, I'd not have gone—and I'd not have been pestered with the sight of you."

His heavy brown hand twitched on his knife. Beside him, Carlton, who had held his own against many a good man, looked slender and inadequately muscled.

Carelessly, Carlton shifted the revolver in his belt. It was another object of Gorilla's envy as well as his respect; for while Carlton had escaped from the sea with a knife and a gun and a small amount of water-stained ammunition, Gorilla had only his knife.

"No matter how far we worked off our course," Carlton said with a conviction he was far from feeling, "sooner or later some other ship will do the same. Do you see anything?"

He meant to distract Gorilla's attention, as he had done many a time before; but he succeeded only in angering him.

"You're the happy Willie, ain't you?" Gorilla sneered, scrambling to his feet. "I reckon I'll have to put you out if I want any rest from your cunning little ways."

Carlton rose, too. Automatically, he shoved the pearl into his pocket and slipped the bag into place at his belt. This was the moment he had been dreading. He had seen enough of fighting men and fighting ways to know that in a purely physical encounter he would be pulp in the hands of McGuire.

His fingers touched the gun at his belt in a gesture that had always quieted his companion; but his eyes swept the sea. Something in his throat clicked. He tried to speak, but could not. Gorilla crouched. The next instant, Carlton was racing up the beach, making for the sheer rock headland, shouting as he ran: "A ship! A ship!"

Suspicious, bewildered, Gorilla's eyes, too, turned to the sea. Far to the north, he sighted it, slipping behind the rocks—the prettiest winged thing that ever took to water.

Leaping like the great monkey after which he was called, Gorilla was off, whooping, shouting, gurgling with glee.

CARLTON was near the cliff, waving his arms, the pearl bag at his belt swinging in small, sharp arcs when a prescience of danger brought him back from his mad welcome. Perhaps it was the cessation of the noises that had crowded Gorilla's throat; perhaps it was the sound of his feet on the rocks behind him and the memory of the death he had seen in the other's face that spun him around.

"This is the end of your luck," Gorilla chuckled, his eyes red with green as they clung to Carlton's pearl sack; and Carlton could see the deep, swift throb of every cord and muscle in his bare throat and the big veins web out over his temples.

"You'll hang," Carlton warned.

"They'll never know. I'll stuff your pockets with rocks and you'll go down. Maybe there are sharks—"

He lunged straight for Carlton's heart, but he tripped on a root and fell.

Like a flash, Carlton was upon him, wrenching the knife from his grasp and sending it glinting far out to sea. With fingers that trembled, Carlton tore his own pearl sack from his belt. In a dead, white arc it followed, sinking deeply and cleanly from sight.

"You threw them away!" Gorilla gasped.

"My luck won't bother you now," Carlton answered. "Keep your shirt on and watch the ship."

Far out to sea, yet dipping nearer and nearer, swam the white ship, a neat thing made for the pleasure of men whose pleasures lay far afield. And then, like a flashing swallow, it

turned in its course and beat out east and south, away from island and the two refugees!

Pinch-faced and aghast, they stared at each other.

"She's passing us up," croaked Gorilla McGuire.

"She can't be! No man would pass up a signal like that."

They turned to the tree and the shirt they had tied to its topmost point. The shirt was gone.

Like twin rockets, they were off.

They found the shirt lying some yards from the tree, torn free from the knotted sleeves by the wind.

"Your gun," Gorilla cried, his face purpled with all the blood in his starved body. "Fire. They may hear."

Dully, Carlton drew the gun from his belt. He pulled the trigger—once, twice, three times, four, five. On the sixth try came a single report.

"Duds," snarled Gorilla. "Load her again."

Far to the east, the yacht passed from sight behind the fringe of bush and tree that capped the headland.

"Quick!" Gorilla shouted, and his breath came hot on Carlton's cheek.

From his pocket, Carlton took another charge. Bunglingly, he fitted the shells in their places. The chamber was awkward in closing. He forced it.

"You fool!" Gorilla shrieked. "Can't you hurry? We've lost them."

Like an avalanche, he was upon Carlton. One hand snatched for the gun and caught Carlton's wrist. The other battered at his face with a fury that threatened to destroy it; but Carlton clung to the revolver and Gorilla's muscular neck.

He felt that this must be the end. Gorilla was mad with all the accumulated madness of the dragging days of torture they had endured together, stark mad with disappointment and grief.

Carlton was sure that this was the

end; but he fought on with all the strength of desperation. Grimly, he smiled as swirl after swirl of pain swept in. He made himself think of a bulldog, whose only retaliation was to shut its eyes, hang on, and take a prodigious amount of punishment.

DIMLY through his throbbing senses cut the cries of men, the snapping of underbrush. He had been a fool not to know that the yacht was making for the other side of the island and a landing. They had seen the signal. It must have torn loose just before he and Gorilla reached the headland. With a laugh, he released his hold on Gorilla and on the weapon, for which they struggled, so suddenly that he sent the man sprawling.

Gorilla McGuire had heard nothing. Slaving and red-eyed, he lifted the gun, but the men from the yacht leaped upon him, forcing him to his back, while he swore his undying hatred of Carlton and wept shamelessly.

"Let me get him," he begged. "He ain't human. He threw away pearls. He fumbled his gun. Fumbled his gun, do you hear, when seconds meant life to us? Let me get him."

"Lord, man, you're a cool one," the boatswain said softly to Carlton. "Talk about luck! If we hadn't come—"

A smile plucked at Carlton's lips; and he reached for his revolver. He broke it and shook out the shells, empty of lead, but plugged with bits of cloth torn from his shirt.

"It wasn't luck," he explained. "I never take unnecessary chances. For weeks I've had only one good shell, but as long as he didn't know he'd understand my hanging onto my gun; so—"

Gravely he drew the plug from the mouth of a shell and poured a thin stream of pearls into his palm.

"The bag I threw away was full of pebbles."

THE END.



"There'll be something the matter with you, doc, if you don't get that fever out of him."

Man-Hunt

Judge Lavercrombe, brutal leader of the outlaws, strikes again in his ruthless scheming for Laura Bainter's mine and for revenge on Webb Summers

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "The Raider," "Mystery Land," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

NED FUNSTALL, wild and reckless young cowboy, approaches a cabin just as Ben Lavercrombe strikes and kills his wife Emily. There is a gun duel, in which Funstall kills him; then he rides south, seeking the woman's relatives in Pardo, Arizona.

Webb Summers, Funstall's old friend, finds the bodies, and recognizes the print of his right hand—which has the third finger partly cut off—on a dusty packet of envelopes. Fearing that Funstall had committed murder, yet not wishing to set sheriffs on him

until he knew the truth, Summers rides after him, searching throughout the southern Arizona outlaw country for him. In Pardo he finds news of Funstall; and when he rescues Laura Bainter from the advances of Judge Lavercrombe, she tells him of Funstall's supposed death at the judge's hands. Lavercrombe and the Loaza gang are after a hidden gold mine on Laura Bainter's property; and when Summers sides with her, two attempts are made to kill him. Each time a mysterious rider comes to the rescue.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 20.

Finally the Loaza gang surround the Bainter cabin, trying to kill Summers, Laura, and her crippled brother Jerry. Summers accounts for several of the Mexicans, and then stands siege in a tunnel under the cliff, till the gang are dispersed by the coming of Clay Meeder's men. Meeder is a reckless, dangerous man, an unsuccessful suitor for Laura's hand. With him comes Ned Funstall! Funstall tells how, when he was in a fever, some one who resembled him stole his clothes and horse; this was the man whom Lavercrombe shot.

Summers questions Funstall about the killing of Ben and Emily Lavercrombe; and when Funstall realizes that his friend suspects *him* of striking Emily, he grimly refuses to clear himself—not realizing how damning the circumstantial evidence looked, nor how Summers had come all this distance, hoping against hope. Summers has an added blow when he chances upon Laura and Clay Meeder. She has just thanked Clay for the rescue, and has confessed her love for Summers, with a plea to Clay not to fight Webb. When Summers comes in, she is just kissing Meeder, in her gratitude for his half promise.

Disillusioned, and feeling that he is no longer needed, Webb Summers rides away blindly, not realizing he is on the trail into the Apache country. He is chased by Indians, but kills four and escapes, afoot and wounded. When his horse Major returns riderless, Funstall and Meeder's men ride after the Indians and kill them, but can find no trace of Summers, whom they think the redskins had killed.

Weak and almost delirious, Summers drags himself to a cabin in the woods. Men find him there, and he comes to, when they start searching him. One is Judge Lavercrombe. Suddenly Summers realizes he has the diagram of Laura's secret mine; and he tries, vainly, to chew it up. They wrest it from him, and hurry away; but

Lavercrombe fiendishly intent on revenge, remains to batter Summers's weakened body into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LAVERCROMBE STRIKES.

FOR two days following the departure of Funstall to search for Summers, Laura stayed close to the cabin. With the exception of several hours of the first day, which she had spent on the cliff behind the cabin, to see Funstall and the Meeder outfit riding westward over the desert, she had sat on the porch with Jerry beside her, steadily staring at the gorge at the far end of the valley, where Summers had vanished from her sight.

She felt that she was responsible for Summers's decision to quit the valley. She had known that Summers had fallen in love with her. He had made it very plain to her by the way he had looked at her. And she had fallen in love with him, instantly, with her first glance into his eyes when they had been in the desert after he had rescued her from Judge Lavercrombe. She had intended to tell him why she had kissed Clay Meeder. But he had gone away before the opportunity came.

She knew how he felt. In spite of his trip southward in search of Funstall, she knew that he had faith in his friend; she was aware that he had hoped that Funstall would be able to explain, and that he had been terribly disappointed when Funstall kept silent. That incident alone was enough to discourage him, but she had added to his misery by seeming to prefer Clay Meeder.

There was nothing she could do toward bringing him back, and her helplessness tortured her. She would not have been so deeply remorseful if she had thought that he had merely left the valley to go to another section of the world to live; but since Major had returned riderless she had been certain

that the Indians had got him and that they would kill him before Funstall and Meeder could find him.

On the third day she could not stay in the cabin. She knew there was danger of the Loazas returning; that they would surely visit her should they discover that Meeder and Funstall had gone. But she was at the end of her patience, and so she went to the stable, saddled and bridled her horse and rode westward, toward the gorge in which she had last seen Summers.

She had warned Jerry to stay inside the cabin and to seek the rock passageway that led to the cliff in case the Loaza gang bothered him. Jerry was to block the passageway and make his way southward to the Meeder ranch in case the Loazas appeared and tried to molest him.

But Laura anticipated no trouble from the Loazas. They had had one brush with Summers and Clay Meeder and they would not seek another. Then, too, they had no way of knowing that Clay Meeder and Funstall had ridden away; nor would they know what had happened to Summers.

She knew she could not help in finding Summers, but the very fact that she was riding in the direction Summers had taken gave her a feeling of doing something at least. And so she rode rapidly, eagerly.

When she reached the foot of the gorge she brought the horse to a walk. She rode slowly upward until she reached the rock upon which Summers had sat when she had watched him from the parapet wall above the cabin. She halted the horse there and sat in the saddle wondering what Summers's emotions had been while he had been sitting there gazing back into the valley. After awhile she set her lips grimly and sent the horse clattering up the gorge.

She rode only a little distance out on the plain at the top of the gorge when she came upon the Indian pony and the varicolored feathers that had fallen

from the war bonnets of the two braves that Summers had killed. She was wise in the lore of sign reading, and she was able to interpret some of the action that had taken place on the level.

SHE spent an hour riding here and there, examining the hoof tracks of the Indian ponies. She followed one set of tracks down the gorge. They were Major's. She saw where Major had stopped to drink; found the place where he had turned. She followed his tracks back and went with them into the timber, where she found more feathers.

There had been many Indians. She found where they had all halted, and she followed the bunched hoof tracks that led westward. She was almost ready to faint with horror from the imaginary pictures she had drawn when she returned to the head of the gorge.

She saw where Funstall had come out of the gorge, and she observed how he had ridden around, as she had ridden, reading the tracks and piecing together the story of the tragedy.

She found a place where a number of new tracks merged with the hoof-prints of the Indian ponies. These tracks were the tracks of iron-shod hoofs and she knew they had been made by the horses of the Meeder outfit. They went westward, following the Indian trail.

Laura was convinced that Summers had been captured, but still she lingered, sitting erect in the saddle and shading her eyes with her hands in an effort to peer into the western haze which, she believed, held the mystery of Summers's disappearance.

She knew, of course, that when the Indians had left the head of the gorge Summers had not been killed. If they had killed him they would have tortured him and scalped him, and they would not have bothered to carry his body away.

The place held a terrible fascination for her and she could not leave it. She

rode down into the gorge, dismounted and watered her horse. Trailing the reins over the animal's head, she permitted it to graze upon the pale grass that grew in the perpetual shade of the rocks, while she moved to a flat rock, seated herself and yielded to the tears that had been repressed for two days.

She was drying her eyes by dabbing at them with her handkerchief when she heard a clatter of hoofs up the gorge, and she stood up quickly to see a band of horsemen coming down the gorge toward her. They must have descended quite a distance before she heard them, for now they were close to her, and she saw Judge Lavercrombe riding ahead of them.

They had seen her before she had caught sight of them, for Lavercrombe was grinning widely. They were so close that she had no opportunity to reach her horse, so she stood rigid, facing them.

"Alone, eh?" said Lavercrombe.

Lavercrombe's men had halted their horses at a little distance, and Lavercrombe had ridden on until he was not more than three or four feet distant.

He slid out of the saddle, stepped in her direction and surveyed her critically.

Lavercrombe was a big man. He was Ben Lavercrombe's father, and in spite of the difference in their age the resemblance between them was startling. For Judge Lavercrombe held his age well. His hair was black, his eyes were keen; he was lithe and active and strong. Like Ben, he was massive, and his huge muscles had not yet deteriorated into flesh. As he stood before her now he did not appear to be older than Ben, when Ben had left to take Emily north.

The expression of Lavercrombe's eyes when he looked at Laura had always offended her. They seemed to deliberately disregard the sturdy honesty that characterized her; they appeared to hint of a mysterious understanding between them. It was as if he

was confident that one day she would accept the attentions he was eager to offer her.

But there was something else in Judge Lavercrombe's eyes to-day; something that sent a shiver of apprehension over her. Deep in his eyes lurked a gleam of satisfaction, of triumph.

And his manner was not the same as always. There had come an unfamiliar serenity, a calm and complacent, almost a humorous tolerance toward her.

His keen eyes were appraising her, smiling at her as if he knew what was troubling her.

"THERE'S been Indians up there," he said. "They got somebody. Who was it?"

"I don't know."

"You're lyin'. You've been cryin'. You wouldn't cry over a stranger. Who was it?"

She would not answer.

"Well," he said, "you don't need to tell. It was that Summers man, wasn't it?"

"How do you know?" she asked, amazed.

Lavercrombe laughed.

"A guess, mebbe," he answered. He winked at the other riders, who smiled mysteriously. "A good guess," added Lavercrombe. "It was Summers."

His gaze was searching.

"Look here," he went on, "one of the boys saw the Meeders headin' west, goin' like hell. There's Indian tracks up there, an' they was headin' west. Did the Indians get that Summers man?"

Laura nodded affirmatively. Lying would not help her.

"So they got Summers," said Lavercrombe. "Well, well. An' the Meeder outfit has gone trailin' the Indians, hopin' to bring Summers back. An' you liked Summers well enough to cry about him. I reckon he knowed you

liked him an' that's why he shot me the other night, eh?"

"No!" she declared.

"No, of course not. He never saw you before," he derided. "Well, it don't make any difference, anyway. He's gone. An' Clay Meeder an' his outfit is gone. Where's Jerry?"

"At home."

"One of the boys was sayin' there was a strange man with the Meeder outfit. Who was it?"

"Funstall."

"Funstall! I reckon not. I killed Funstall."

"You killed a man who was impersonating Funstall," she told him triumphantly.

Lavercrombe started. For an instant he stood staring at Laura incredulously, and then his face flamed with passion.

"You sure of that?"

"I am sure of it," she said. "The real Funstall is a friend of Summers. He has been staying with Clay Meeder since you killed the man who impersonated him. It was Funstall who helped the Meeders kill some of your men—the men you sent to my cabin to take me away. Both Summers and Funstall hate you."

Lavercrombe laughed.

"So that's it," he said. "I found a letter in the stuff I took from the man I shot—the man who was passin' himself off as Funstall. The letter was to this Summers man. It wasn't finished, an' I reckon it was meant to explain some things to Summers. It told how this man Funstall had shot Ben. I was tickled to find I'd revenged Ben. Now you tell me I didn't kill the real Funstall, an' I've got to do it all over again. I'll sure be glad to do it. Well, when you get a woman to talkin' you sure get a lot of information."

He laughed again and drew from a pocket a piece of paper which was stained red in spots. He spread it open and turned it so she could see some lines that appeared upon it.

"Did you ever see that before?" he asked.

She gasped, snatched at the paper, missed it. He drew it away and laughed loudly.

IT was the diagram of the mine. She remembered that she had sent Summers down to the cabin after it, while she and Jerry had waited behind the parapet wall of the cliff. She had almost forgotten it.

She had observed the red stains upon it. She grew faint with a nameless apprehension.

"So you know it, eh?" mocked Lavercrombe.

"Where did you get that paper?" she asked. "And is—is that blood?"

"That's blood," said Lavercrombe. He added brutally: "Summers's blood."

"Where is he?"

Lavercrombe laughed. "Why, the Indians got him, didn't they?" He glanced at the other riders, and they laughed with him.

"If the Indians got him how did you get that paper?" she asked.

"Why, that's so," jeered Lavercrombe. "You're keen, eh? Well, all I know is that we've got the paper. We ain't none concerned about Summers, an' if the Indians ain't got him he must be somewhere else. We ain't botherin' about him right now. What we're tellin' you is that Summers had this paper. He must have chewed on it, because there's places that's rubbed out, an' we can't make head nor tail of it. We're intendin' to, now that we've met you. We're aimin' to have you tell us what's missin', so's we can find the mine."

She stiffened defiantly.

"I don't know anything about the location of the mine," she declared.

"You can't remember, eh?" he said, evenly. "I reckon you can't even remember that you worked the mine for awhile. The time you took that bag of gold to Mrs. Blandin."

"That was gold that father took from the mine," she said.

"You're lyin', of course. You know where the mine is. You're goin' to tell us. You'll be glad to tell, before we get through with you. We've got a place where we'll take you until you get a chance to think it over."

Laura thought of escape, but Lavercrombe interpreted the glance she gave her horse. He motioned, and two of his men leaped their horses and quickly captured the animal.

Swiftly Lavercrombe seized her in his arms. In spite of her struggles he held her tightly while some of the other men tied her hands behind her and knotted a handkerchief around her head, so that her eyes were covered.

She screamed, and another handkerchief was tied over her lips.

The men were laughing.

She was lifted to the back of a horse—her own, for the saddle fitted her and the stirrup straps were of the proper length—and she felt the animal mount the gorge. Ahead of her and behind her the other horses clattered.

SHE was too terror-stricken to talk, even if speech had been possible.

She knew there was no escape. Lavercrombe had come upon her just at the right time, for his purposes. She did not know when Funstall and the Meeder outfit would return. Jerry was helpless, and she felt that Summers had been killed by Lavercrombe, if not by the Indians. Lavercrombe, she judged, had been spying upon Funstall, Summers, and the Meeder outfit, and knew there was no danger of their returning until he had accomplished what he intended doing.

Her horse was being led by one of the men. She was aware, finally, that she was riding over a level, and she tried to keep track of the various turns that were made so that she might be able to retain a sense of direction. But it was not long until the turns grew so frequent that she became confused. She

suspected that her horse was being deliberately diverted from a straight course.

However, they could not completely deceive her, for she felt the sun against the handkerchief that covered her eyes and she knew that she was being taken eastward. And she was also aware that the trail they were riding was through a timbered country, for she felt branches scraping against her and heard dead limbs crashing and cracking as the horses stepped upon them. But there was timber on both the levels that flanked the valley and she was not able to determine whether they were riding the north level or the south.

No word was spoken to her. The men did not talk to one another. They seemed to be riding in single file, for all sound appeared to come either from the front or the rear.

It was not long that Laura felt the sun penetrating through the handkerchief to her eyes, for presently she was aware that it was shining on the top of her head, and that after awhile it was on the back of her neck.

They rode on, steadily, mile after mile. They emerged from one forest, crossed an open stretch of sand and entered another forest. They went down great slopes into deep basins, and out of them to levels. And after awhile the sun sank and the dusk came. Light no longer filtered through the handkerchief on Laura's eyes.

It must have been near midnight when her horse was brought to a halt. She heard Lavercrombe's voice, close to her.

"You boys go on to the cache. We'll light here."

The other horse clattered on and finally the sound of their hoofbeats ceased.

Lavercrombe slipped out of the saddle. Laura felt his hands on her arms.

"Get down," he ordered, and drew her toward him.

He laughed when her feet touched the ground.

"Well," he said, "we're in a place now where there'll be no interference."

CHAPTER XXV.

A RIDE IN THE NIGHT.

DEJECTEDLY Funstall turned his spent horse into the Bainter stable. He stood for a time in the stable door, somberly gazing into the valley, and when at last he moved toward the bunk house his shoulders were drooping and his step was heavy.

He had no further interest in this place, and to-morrow he would leave. He liked Clay Meeder, but his liking for Meeder was not the sort of thing he had felt for Summers. And if he stayed in this vicinity everything would continually remind him of his friend.

He halted at the door of the bunk house and finally sank to the threshold where, with his head in his hands, he sat staring at the ground at his feet.

The moon was bright and when after awhile he lifted his gaze he observed that the cabin door was open. There was no light in the cabin, and he wondered if Laura and Jerry had gone to bed leaving the door open. Remembering her fear of the Loazas he doubted that she would be guilty of that bit of negligence. She must still be up, and was perhaps sitting inside, waiting for him to bring word of Summers.

Funstall got up and walked to the edge of the porch.

He called repeatedly, and when he received no answer he crossed the porch and knocked heavily upon the door. When he got no reply to the summons he entered, crossed the darkened room and felt for the door of Laura's room. The door was open. He lit a match and was amazed to find that the room was not occupied. He looked into Jerry's room. That, too, was empty.

He now had a premonition that the Loazas had returned and he went to the door that led to the rock passage-

way. It was closed, but he opened it and made his way up the passage. He found that the balanced rock had been toppled over so that it completely blocked the passage.

The Loazas had come, and Laura and Jerry had escaped over the mesa. Undoubtedly they would make their way to Meeder's ranch, if they had not already done so. He would have to make sure of that, of course, and so he descended the passageway, intending to mount his horse and ride to Meeder's.

He was at the front door of the cabin when he heard a rapid drumming on the hard sand of the valley floor, and he peered out to see a horse coming toward him, from the north.

The horse bore a rider, and the rider was a woman.

Laura! That was his first thought. He stepped out upon the porch just as the rider entered a patch of moonlight which shone directly on her face. Then he saw that the rider was a woman whom he did not remember having seen before.

She was coming fast, and directly toward the cabin, and by the time he reached the edge of the porch she was pulling her horse up. Her bosom was heaving, her eyes were wide with excitement.

"Miz Bainter! Where is she?" she gasped.

"She ain't here. I don't know where she went."

The woman seemed to pay no attention to his words; she was staring at him with an intensity that amazed him.

"You look like Funstall!" she said, finally.

"I am Funstall."

She shook her head rapidly, incredulously.

"Funstall was killed," she said. Her voice grew contemptuous. "How then can you be Funstall?"

"I'm Funstall. Judge Lavercrombe killed the wrong man."

"Then the man is not crazy, after

all," she said as if to herself. "Oh! It is too pitiful! He lie there so white an' still an' whisper for Funstall."

"WHO?" shouted Funstall. He was at her stirrup now, and his eyes were blazing with a wild hope.

"That Summers man," said the woman.

Funstall was gripping the woman's arms; he almost pulled her out of the saddle.

"Where is he? Talk! Where is he?"

"You get your horse, I show you."

Funstall ran to the stable. As he ran he remembered that Major had come in. He found the animal in a stall and swiftly saddled and bridled him. He swung up on Major, and when the woman saw him coming she wheeled her own animal and sent it scampering northward, over the trail she had taken to reach the Bainter place.

They rode fast across the valley. The woman rode swiftly; but Major would have passed her had not Funstall held him down. Summers's big horse seemed to divine the significance of his errand, for he fought stubbornly for his head as they fled through the dark aisles of the forest.

Funstall could not formulate the questions that would set his terrible impatience at rest. But the woman's words implied that Summers was alive and conscious, whatever his condition, and Funstall's dominant desire was to reach him as soon as he could.

The woman rode up a long, sloping wash on the north side of the valley to a trail that ran along the base of a towering cliff; along that trail to another slope, and into another forest.

She seemed to know the trail, for not once did she hesitate. Her horse ran with a long and steady stride, without urging.

Major followed closely. For an hour they fled almost straight north.

Then the woman began to bear slightly eastward. They descended a valley and followed it eastward. They went out of it to a high, level country, and then down again, still eastward, into more timber. At the edge of the timber a narrow trail flashed in Funstall's vision. It ran a sinuous course through the timber for a mile or two and brought them to a rather large cabin which stood at the edge of a clearing close to the bank of a small stream.

Ahead, the woman held up a warning hand and slowed her horse to a walk. Funstall did likewise. At the edge of the clearing the woman dismounted, tied her horse to a tree, waited until Funstall trailed the reins over Major's head, and then walked toward a door in the front of the cabin.

An instant later Funstall was standing inside the cabin looking down at Summers. He stifled the hoarse exclamation of horror and pity that reached his lips, and abruptly dropping to his knees beside the bunk in which Summers was lying, knelt there, rigid and silent, gazing at his friend.

Summers's face was bandaged until only his eyes were visible. And they were closed. A kerosene lamp on a shelf opposite the bunk threw a fitful light upon the injured man. He was limp and lax. His right arm was bandaged, and his shoulder. The bandages were clean and had been moistened, evidently in an effort to allay the fever, for there was evidence of fever in Summers's manner. His head rolled from side to side and he muttered unintelligibly.

Funstall got up and stood with folded arms. His face was as white as the bandages in which Summers was swathed. At Funstall's side the woman stood, whispering.

"THIS is Luiz Perillo's shack," she said. "He is a nester, an' my countryman. I come here often to visit him. I came last night over the trail above Bainter Valley. I was

late. There is an old cabin directly south of here, almost at the edge of the valley; a miner used to live there, but now he is gone. When I come that way to visit Luiz I always stop there for a drink. There is good water—a spring. Last night while I knelt at the spring I heard a moan. It seemed to come from the old cabin. I was afraid, but I went to the door. Summers was lying in the doorway. When I saw him he was crawling on his stomach, trying to get outside. *Madre de Dios!* He was smashed to pieces. The Indians, you think?"

Funstall's teeth were clamped together. He did not look at the woman, but kept his gaze upon Summers. He spoke through his teeth:

"Go on."

"I knew he was bad hurt." The woman's voice quavered at the recollection. Funstall knew who she was now; Juanita, the Mexican girl who lived at the crest of the plateau above Pardo.

"I get him on my horse—how, I do not know. I even bring his rifle. He say nothing, only once. Then he open his eyes an' say: 'I know you—you Juanita.' I bring him here, an' me an' Luiz take care of him. He not so bad hurt by the bullet in his shoulder. He bleed much an' it make him weak. But somethin' else happen' to him. He been keek, it look like, an' his face is bust, like somebody beat him. He lay like he is all day. Once in while he speak you name. I think mebbe Laura Bainter know where to find you, an' so I go there. An' you are there. He's brave man, Summers; once he save my life. He need doctor, for fever."

"There's a doctor in Pardo?"

"Yes—Carson. He live in last house, south of town."

"How far is Pardo?"

"Six mile."

Funstall looked once more at Summers and then stepped quickly through the doorway.

He ran to Major and leaped into the saddle. Juanita stood in the door-

way, watching, as Major flitted through the forest.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DELIRIUM.

JUST at sunrise Dr. Carson slid wearily from his horse at the edge of the clearing near the Perillo cabin and walked toward the door, where Juanita awaited him.

Dr. Carson was middle-aged and dissolute-looking, and evidently liked to sleep late in the morning, for as he walked toward Juanita there was a deep scowl on his face and his eyes were alight with resentment.

He had been at the Perillo cabin before, however, for he had ridden ahead of Funstall without straying from the trail; and he knew Juanita, for he snapped a greeting to her as he neared the door.

A few minutes later he was sitting beside the bunk examining Summers. Funstall, tall and slender and ominously quiet, stood near him.

Dr. Carson's resentment was betrayed by the rough manner in which he made his examination of the wounded man. Carson had not been asked to make this visit; he had been ordered to do it by a white-faced, determined man who had awakened him before daylight by sticking a pistol in his ribs. And when he had been slow in dressing he had been spoken to in no uncertain terms.

And now, observing the doctor's roughness, Funstall spoke again.

"If you shove him like that again, doc, I'll bust you all over the place."

Carson's face reddened with anger.

"There's nothing the matter with the man except a little fever."

"Well, there'll be somethin' the matter with you, doc, if you don't get that fever out of him."

Carson exposed the wound in Summers's shoulder. The doctor's manner was more subdued now, and he showed

Funstall and Juanita that there was no infection.

"It's healing as well as it would have healed if it had been treated right away," he said. "The bullet went right through and the wound bled enough to wash it out. He's lost a lot of blood, and it looks to me as if the fever is from exhaustion. But the man is as healthy as a grass-fed steer, and he'll be up and around in a few days. Who shot him?"

"Indians," said Funstall.

"Where did it happen?"

"At the west end of the valley."

"Bainter Valley?"

Funstall nodded, and Carson's eyes widened.

"Tell me, where did you find him—here?"

"Two or three miles south."

"Did he ride all that distance after being wounded?"

"Walked, I reckon. His horse drifted back to Bainter's the morning he was shot."

"Why, that's ten or twelve miles!"

Carson shook his head. "No wonder he's weak!" he added. "There ain't one man in a million could have done that!"

"That's him," said Funstall. His teeth were clamped together again. As he watched Carson at work with the wound he said quietly:

"What would have made his face like that, doc?"

"Looks like he's been beaten up."

"Fists?"

Carson bent closer to the wounded man and again examined the huge welts and abrasions.

"Sure," he said, "there's the imprint of knuckles."

Funstall was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Seems like if it had been Indians they would have scalped him."

"They would."

"An' I never heard of Indians usin' their fists on a man, doc. They know other ways of misusin' a man."

"They certainly do!" declared Carson.

HE worked over Summers. He made a solution and moistened the bandages with it; he applied medication of some sort to the bruises on Summers's face and gently forced some medicine into his mouth. Then he mixed more medicine in a cup and handed it to Juanita.

"You'll take care of him, I suppose," he said. "Well, give him a teaspoonful of this every hour." He got up and walked to the door. "It won't take him long to get over this. He's strong."

"It won't take him long, eh?" said Funstall.

"No; not long."

"That's good for you," said Funstall.

"Why good for me?"

"Because the sooner he gets over it, the sooner you go back to town."

"Why, that's ridiculous!"

"A lot of things are ridiculous, doc. It would be ridiculous if you'd made a mistake in decidin' what was wrong with him an' I'd have to ride to town again to bring you back. We ain't goin' to do no guessin' about him."

"You don't think you are going to hold me here against my will?"

"Sure, if your will is to go. You ain't acted right in this deal, doc. You've been too reluctant, for one thing. For another thing, you was too rough with Summers, an' I don't think you studied his case deep enough. So you're stayin' here until I see that he's comin' along all right. An' if he don't come along all right, why, it ain't goin' to do you any good at all. If he's goin' to die there's a lot of people around here that's goin' to die, too. You can suit yourself."

Carson looked at Funstall, at Summers, and back again at Funstall. What he saw in Funstall's eyes must have decided him, for he set his medicine case down in a corner, removed his

coat and hat and dropped into a chair. He grinned reluctantly at Juanita.

"I don't suppose you are going to keep me here without feeding me?" he said. He pointed to Summers. "We'll have this fellow well in no time."

But Summers's recovery was not so rapid as Carson predicted. Nor did the fever abate as he had expected.

The day passed with Carson spending most of his time at the side of the bunk watching the patient.

Summers was quiet, but he kept moving his head from side to side, as though seeking the ease that was denied him.

"That's the pain from the beating he got," Carson explained. "It will last three or four days. Whoever beat him up like that did a good job. But the bruises are all external. If he hadn't been shot like that he wouldn't have minded the beating. He'd be up and around."

Carson seemed to have resigned himself to Funstall's dictum, for he made himself at home in the cabin; and when night came he rolled into one of the bunks with apparent eagerness.

During the night Summers muttered. Most of it was unintelligible, but occasionally a sentence or two could be understood. It was not Carson who listened for what Summers might say, but Funstall, who occupied a bunk opposite him.

During the early evening Funstall had gone to sleep. He had had no sleep in about forty-eight hours, and he would have been excused if he had slept soundly until morning. But his concern for Summers would not permit that, and so he spent part of the night propped up on an elbow, watching and listening.

"**T**RYIN' to get around behind me, eh?" Summers said once, clearly. "Well, I have been expectin' that."

That would be the Indians, Funstall decided.

Later Summers laughed lowly, and muttered: "That war bonnet don't look so pretty now."

Funstall divined what was happening to Summers. He was mentally reenacting his fight with the Indians.

Later, in the early hours of the morning, his mutterings became, to Funstall, incoherent.

He talked of a mine, the sky, sand, and a waterhole; and it was evident that his recollection of these things was fragmentary. "If you'd not keep turnin' around like that a man could keep you in one place—but crawlin' ain't so bad if—now how far do you suppose I'd have got if I hadn't found any water—chewin' paper—would mebber keep them from gettin' an idea—why, I know you—if you'd take that torch away I reckon I'd know—do it right while you're doin' it—you'll never get another chance—"

And then in a changed voice he said: "That ain't like Ned—but if you want to kiss him, ma'am, that's your business—there's Tombstone an' Bisbee—no, I'll not take him back."

He seemed to sleep for a time, but later he appeared to writhe in agony.

"Shucks, he's gone in. I reckon we'll never get at it now. Do you reckon he meant I should go to hell?"

It was Funstall who writhed now, for that was what he had said to Summers when they had been talking in front of the bunk house on the morning Summers had left the Bainter cabin. He had instantly entered the bunk house, leaving Summers standing outside; and he had stood inside, watching Summers stare dejectedly at the ground.

And now Summers grew vehement and waved his left arm.

"There's enough of you to do what you want to do. But you won't take it until I'm not doin' any thinkin' any more!" he declared, defiantly. "I'll chew it until there ain't anything left of it—" Then disgustedly: "He's knocked it out of my mouth. Shucks,

Lavercrombe, do you call that hittin'? You're big, all right, but you ain't—that sure was a lulu—I reckon one more like that an'—why, yes, ma'am, I'll get on your horse—but I don't seem to—yes, I'm all right now—sure, stronger—why, I've got to be, ma'am—you see, Funstall will be waitin'—he'll know I'll be back. Why, ma'am, Funstall's my friend!"

And now, for a time, Funstall heard nothing more. For he had rolled over and buried his face in his pillow.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON THE TRAIL!

THERE was little improvement in Summers the next day, and Dr. Carson spent most of his time sitting beside the bunk watching the sick man. Juanita stood faithfully by, but Funstall occupied his time outside the cabin. Several times he came to the front door and looked in, but he said nothing and he did not linger long in the doorway. He was tormented by what he had overheard Summers saying in his delirium. Remorse had assailed him, for he knew now that Summers would not have started his lonesome pilgrimage had conditions been different.

The time passed slowly for Funstall. He groomed Major; he oiled saddle and bridle, sitting dejectedly on a stump and slowly rubbing the leather to make it pliable. He could do nothing for Summers now; he was too clumsy to help inside the house. He felt futile and unnecessary and his isolation deepened his misery.

But in that misery stirred a rage that blanched his face. In his delirium Summers had mentioned the name, "Lavercrombe," and Funstall was not quite certain which Lavercrombe had been meant: the judge or the Lavercrombe Funstall had killed for striking "Emily." He wanted to be sure about that.

The day dragged along, and toward dusk Carson came out and, without looking at Funstall, threw himself into a clump of grass near where Funstall was sitting and drew a deep breath.

"He's improving," he said finally. "Not a great deal. But the fever has gone down a little, and if things are as I hope he'll be getting some sleep pretty soon."

"Has he done any talkin' to-day?" asked Funstall.

"Some. It's disjointed. I thought maybe he'd say something that would indicate what had happened to him—I mean who had beaten him that way. But his talk jumps about too much."

"He mention any names?"

"Why, yes. He mentioned Judge Lavercrombe."

"You sure he hung the 'Judge' onto the Lavercrombe?"

"Of course."

"How did he say it, doc?"

"Why, if I remember correctly, he said: 'Sure; it's Judge Lavercrombe. He looks just like Ben.'"

"That all?"

"That was all about Lavercrombe."

"You know Lavercrombe pretty well, doc?"

"Not well. But I know him. The judge ain't my kind."

"What made Lavercrombe a judge?"

"Oh, he's been a justice of the peace some time, I reckon."

"He sticks around town pretty much, eh?"

"Well, not in the last few days. He and some of the Loaza men rode out of town three or four days ago. At night. I didn't get up to see which way they went. West, I think."

Funstall's eyes were dark with passion. Carson did not happen to look at him, but continued:

"I understand Lavercrombe and the Loazas made some threats about Summers. They say Summers killed some of their best men. I wouldn't be surprised if Lavercrombe was mixed up

in this thing. As I told you, the Indians would hardly beat a man up like that."

"THE Indians shot him, though," said Funstall. "There wasn't no Lavercrombe man or no Loaza man hurt or killed around the shack where Juanita found Summers. An' there was five cartridges missin' from the magazine of Summers's rifle; I found where he had been fightin' the Indians. Four had been killed or hurt. There was no cartridges fired from Summers's Colt, an' there would have been if the Indians had got close to him."

Carson continued to rest in the grass, while Funstall got up and walked slowly toward the door of the cabin. Leaning against the jamb he peered inside.

Juanita was kneeling beside Summers, stroking his forehead. She was evidently trying to quiet him, for he was talking again.

"You're takin' mighty good care of him," said Funstall.

"Why not?" she answered. "Sure. He save my life."

"When was that?"

"The night he come." She told him about Pedro Loaza and the rattlesnake. But before Funstall had an opportunity to say anything, Summers laughed and spoke slowly and distinctly. There was a taunt in his voice.

"All right, Lavercrombe," he said, "do it right while you are doin' it. You'll never get another chance."

Funstall's eyes blazed with passion. He turned abruptly from the door, walked to the stump, where he had left the saddle and bridle he had oiled, picked them up, saddled and bridled Major and stepped to Carson, who had been watching him attentively. He looked down at Carson.

"Doc," he said, "I'm goin' to Pardo. Are you stayin' with Summers until you're sure he's getting better?"

Funstall's voice was quiet, almost

gentle. A strange calmness seemed to have settled over the man.

"Sure," answered Carson. "I wouldn't leave him now. I'm interested."

"Stay interested, doc," said Funstall. He mounted Major and rode eastward into the dusk.

When the shadows of distance had enveloped him, Carson looked around, to see Juanita standing just outside the door. She, too, had witnessed Funstall's departure.

"I know what's eating him," said Carson. "He's gone to hunt Lavercrombe."

Juanita nodded.

There was definiteness in Funstall's intentions toward Lavercrombe, but it was not the definiteness of a hasty and ill-considered revenge. All day sitting on the stump oiling the saddle and bridle his thoughts had been upon Lavercrombe and Summers, and they had strengthened the conviction that it had been Lavercrombe who had beaten Summers with his fists. Summers's words had merely removed the final doubt.

Now riding toward town, there was no evidence of raging eagerness in his manner, only the calm steadiness of a strong determination.

When he came in sight of Pardo he slowed Major to a walk, and when he entered the town's one street he peered into the lighted windows he passed.

Town was strangely quiet. Some of the saloons were lighted, but all that were lighted were empty except for the men whose business it was to operate them. There was no music of any kind; no loungers stood in the doorways. The brothels were dark; the few blanketed Indians that he saw here and there were silent and motionless.

TWICE since he had been in this section he had observed Pardo in this lethargic state, and he knew the reason for it. The greater part of the town's population was nomadic,

They made Pardo their habitat when the sale of stolen stock brought them profit and leisure. It had merely happened that Funstall had arrived when the thieves were engaged in their operations.

However, there was a chance that Lavercrombe might have returned, and if that were the case Funstall would have plenty of time to do what he intended to do.

He rode down the street to Lavercrombe's house. Dismounting, he looped Major's reins over a hitching post, walked to the front door and knocked. He had little expectation that Lavercrombe would be at home, however, and after he had knocked several times he returned to Major, leaned his arms on the saddle and gazed at the darkened house.

Again mounting he rode back the way he had come. He dismounted in front of one of the saloons, entered and ordered a drink.

"I was dead sure there'd be some of the gang in to-night," he said to the bartender.

"Not to-night, I reckon," answered the man. "I was sort of expectin' them." He was sharply searching Funstall's face. "You're Funstall, ain't you?"

Funstall nodded.

"Lookin' for some one in particular?" asked the bartender.

"Lavercrombe."

The bartender smiled crookedly. "Friend of his?"

"When did you think he needed any friends?"

The bartender smiled. "If I ain't mistaken, he'll be needin' all he's got. Meeder an' his outfit, an' that Summers man that was here for a few weeks, sort of busted Lavercrombe's gang the other day. An' when Meeder starts, he generally goes through. He's wild, but he's square. There's bound to be a clean-up. I'm with Meeder, an' I don't care who knows it. Trouble has been brewin' for a long time, an'

it seems that Summers man brought it sooner than it was expected. But if you're lookin' for Lavercrombe I'd advise you to wait until you've got some backin'. You couldn't start nothin' with Lavercrombe with his men around. They'd herd ride you."

"Then you don't expect him in to-night?"

"No. I saw one of his men ride into town to-day—and out. He'd come after somethin', I reckon. He rode west."

Because there appeared to be no prospect that he would be able to meet Lavercrombe that night Funstall rode back to the Perillo cabin.

The next morning Carson was standing beside Summers's bunk when Funstall opened his eyes. The doctor held a finger to his lips. Juanita was softly tiptoeing around the kitchen, preparing breakfast. A Mexican whom Funstall had not seen until now was sitting on a bench in the kitchen smoking a pipe. This was Perillo.

Carson followed Funstall outside. The doctor appeared to be relieved.

"He's sleeping," he said, pointing to the room in which Summers was lying. "When he awakens he will be able to give us the details about what happened to him. The fever has left him. He has a remarkable physique. I am amazed. The wound in his shoulder is already healing, and if he keeps on like that he'll be able to use his right arm in a few days. I never saw anything like it."

"How long will he sleep, doc?"

"He'll sleep a long time, if nothing disturbs him. He's got a lot of sleep coming to him."

"An' you say he'll know us when he wakes up?"

"Certainly. Why shouldn't he?"

FUNSTALL went down the stream a little distance. In a pool of clear, sparkling water, which was shielded from the cabin by a heavy clump of brush, he bathed. Returning to the

cabin, he combed his hair, using a glass which was attached to the wall of the cabin. He breakfasted silently and then went outside again and stood for a long time at the edge of the clearing.

With Summers out of danger, Funstall's thoughts were upon Laura. He knew Summers loved Laura. But Summers did not know that something had happened to force Laura and Jerry to leave the cabin. Funstall knew. And he also knew that he should be searching for the girl rather than to be wasting his time idling around the Perillo cabin waiting for Summers to get well. He wasn't at all necessary here. Juanita would take care of Summers. Besides, now that Summers's return to full consciousness was imminent, Funstall was suddenly reluctant to face him. He was afraid Summers would detect the guilty embarrassment that was sure to grip him when he revealed himself to his friend.

He went to the front door and called Carson out.

"He'll be all right when he wakes up, you say?" he asked.

"I'm positive of that."

"You stayin' until you find out?"

"Sure."

He sought Juanita and talked with her at the back door. He told her what was bothering him, adding: "You ride over to the Bainter place with me. You can bring Major back, so if Summers wants him he'll be here."

An hour later they rode southward. When they reached the Bainter cabin there was no sign of life there. Funstall's horse was grazing in a swale near the cabin. He had not been hitched to the manger and as the stable door was open he had been able to wander about at will.

Juanita rode away, leading Major, and Funstall caught his own horse, led him to the stable, saddled and bridled him, and rode out of the valley.

Funstall headed southward, toward the Meeder ranch, where he expected

he would find Laura and Jerry. A brisk ride through a level land broken by a series of mesas and ridges brought him to the big valley of the Meeder range. A clump of low, rambling buildings formed the Meeder headquarters. The bunk and mess houses were near the wide, shallow river that ran through the valley.

Funstall rode directly toward the bunk houses. He was seen long before he got within talking distance, and the entire outfit clustered around him as he dismounted.

Meeder walked toward him, for he knew from the expression of Funstall's eyes that the man had news.

"You've found Summers!" said Meeder.

With the entire outfit hanging upon his words, Funstall related what had happened.

"So it was Lavercrombe," said Meeder. He was tightening his belt and his wild eyes were glowing with terrible rage. "That's enough for me! We've waited too long, as it is. Saddle up, boys! We'll wipe that scum off the face of the earth!"

Meeder and a dozen others were moving toward the corral to get their horses when Funstall called to them. They stopped, faced him.

"I reckon we'd ought to tell Laura that we found Summers," he said.

"We'll stop at her place on the way to town," returned Meeder.

"Ain't she here?" asked Funstall, amazed.

"What in blazes would she be doin' here?" demanded Meeder.

His face whitened with a new rage as he listened to what Funstall told him.

"Lavercrombe's got her!" he said, his fury almost choking him.

He ran to the corral with his men close behind him. Funstall was already riding back the way he had come. He intended to return to the Bainter cabin. He had not ridden more than a mile or two when he saw the Meeder outfit

swinging out into the open, their horses in a dead run.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VALLEY OF THE OUTLAWS.

WHEN Judge Lavercrombe lifted Laura to the ground he removed the blindfold and the handkerchief that covered her mouth. The moon was shining, and she stood, blinking, slowly recovering her sight.

Lavercrombe held her tightly. She knew it would be futile to scream, for they would not have brought her to a place where her screams could be heard. But she resented Lavercrombe's tight embrace and silently fought to escape it. Lavercrombe held her tighter and laughed at her.

At last, breathless, she was passive in his arms. Then, as though contemptuous of pressing his advantage, he released her.

"You women are all alike," he said. "You are all obstinate as hell until the right man comes along." He swung her around so that she faced him. "Who is it?" he asked. "Meeder or Summers?" He laughed again. "I am rather inclined to think it's Summers. Accordin' to Luiz Loaza, Summers was in that rock passageway with you. And it was Summers who creased me the night I had you in my house. It is Summers!" he added, his voice triumphant, as her cheeks reddened. "Sure! It would be Summers, for I've heard you refused Meeder. Well, I wouldn't think about him too much."

"I know you and your men have killed Summers," she said. "And I warn you that I will kill you the first chance I get!"

He laughed, but he looked long at her white face and her flashing eyes. "I believe you would," he said finally. "But I'll be careful to see that you get no chance."

He took her by an arm and led her

away from the horses. She had been brought into a small valley which was rimmed on two sides by high, rugged cliffs, on a third side by a towering black hill, and on a fourth by a gorge which seemed to connect the valley with another.

Near the mouth of the gorge was a small grass level surrounded by huge boulders and heavy thickets of manzanita, forming a natural corral. She saw the other men putting the horses into this corral. Some of the men, having already unsaddled, were carrying their saddles through an opening in the thicket.

Lavercrombe had told the men to go to the cache, and Laura supposed that somewhere beyond the thicket they maintained a place to sleep. They probably had supplies stored there also, to be used when they were in the vicinity.

She knew that Lavercrombe and the Loazas were thieves who made no secret of their depredations; she was aware that the law never bothered them, and that this section of the world was their kingdom, in which they reigned without fear of molestation except from the Meeder faction. If they used this valley as a rendezvous it was merely because they found it convenient and not because they were ever forced to hide in it.

The moonlight was bright, and she could see every salient feature of the valley distinctly, although she had not the slightest knowledge of its location.

A wild growth of trees and brush filled most of the valley bottom; she was led around the bases of small hills and through natural passageways between huge and grotesque monuments of rock; and finally along a narrow trail through a towering thicket to a small hut that was built on a sloping bench at the base of a high granite wall.

The hut had one window and a door. The window was barred with heavy

wooden beams, and the door was a plank affair with outside fastenings.

THEY stopped in front of the door and the moonlight was so strong that Laura could see Lavercrombe's eyes. There was an ironical light in them.

"You can go right in," he said. "Nobody will bother you. For fastidious folks there is a bar inside as well as outside."

He preceded her and lit a match to show her the interior. There was a bunk and a chair. The bunk was not as clean as she might have wished, but she had no choice.

Lavercrombe applied the match to a candle on a shelf. He moved to the door and looked at her mockingly.

"Even if you are able to get the outside bars loose I wouldn't advise you to do it," he said. "I may go to sleep, and there are the boys to be thought of. I'll see you in the morning. You'll stay here until you decide to tell me where I can find the mine." He went out, shutting the door after him and barring it.

Instantly she slipped the inside fastenings into place and blew out the light. Then she peered out of the window and watched Lavercrombe as far as she could see him. After he vanished into the thicket she sat down on the edge of the bunk to consider her predicament.

She had little hope that any of her friends would ever find her. Even conceding they knew she had disappeared, where would they look for her? Her captors had led her through forest after forest, or so it had seemed to her, and they might be at this minute forty or fifty miles from Bainter Valley. She was almost certain that her friends would not be able to trail her, for they would not even know where she had left the valley.

She had ridden a well-defined trail to the gorge where Lavercrombe and his men had come upon her, and that

would probably be the last place they would look for a trail.

Besides, she had no means of knowing when Funstall and Meeder would return. They might follow the Apaches far into the Indian country, and in that case it might be weeks before they got back to the valley.

She knew that she would not be able to hold out long against Lavercrombe. She had not been deceived by his somewhat conciliatory manner. He had told her that she was to stay here until she divulged the location of the mine, but she had known that he wanted her also, and she was certain that after she told him where the mine could be found he would take her. She had felt the passion in his embrace.

She stretched out in the bunk, fully clothed, and went to sleep. When she awakened in the morning the sun was up. She released the inside fastenings of the door, and to her astonishment discovered that the outside fastenings had been removed, for the door swung open to her touch, letting in a flood of sunlight.

She stood in the doorway for an instant gazing at the virgin wilderness that encompassed her, and then she followed a narrow trail that vanished into the thicket to her left. She decided to follow the trail because there was a suspicion of dampness upon the matted leaves that had been pressed into it, and she had a divination that the trail would lead to water.

After she had gone a hundred yards or so she came upon a clear pool close to the base of the butte. It was supplied by a thin stream that trickled out of a crevice in the granite wall.

She drank, then washed her face and hands. She had no towel, so she dried herself as best she could with a handkerchief, which she later washed and spread upon her shoulder to dry. She was accustomed to doing things for herself and this slight inconvenience was no hardship.

But she was hungry also, and after

spending half an hour exploring the thicket and finding no way out of it, she returned to the trail and went back to the hut.

SOME one had visited the hut during her absence, for when she reached the door she saw that her breakfast had been brought to her. The breakfast consisted of soda biscuit, bacon and coffee.

After satisfying her hunger she went out again. This time she followed the trail Lavercrombe had taken in bringing her to the hut, and she presently found herself through the thicket and into the region where the huge rocks abounded.

She had no idea of trying to escape, for she knew that the horses would be guarded and she could not hope to gain her freedom by walking.

Long though she had lived in Bainter Valley, she was not familiar with a great deal of the country surrounding it. She had confined her traveling to the valley itself, to several miles of the section east and west of it. Perhaps half a dozen times she had made excursions into the forest to the north and south.

But she knew that the country all around Bainter Valley was filled with gigantic systems of miniature divides that were featured by their plains and slopes and hills and gorges and cañons. The little valley in which she was now confined was probably one of the many in the section. But she was hopelessly lost now, and if she were to be given her freedom at this minute she would not have known which direction to take to reach Bainter Valley.

Never in her life had she felt more helpless; and never had she been as angry. When, rounding a corner of a rock spire, she almost ran into Lavercrombe, coming toward her, she was rigid with defiance and contempt.

"I should like to know how much longer you intend to keep me here?" she said.

"That depends entirely upon yourself. If you will tell me where we can find the mine, we will be pulling our freight in five minutes. After you take us to the mine and we make certain you are not foolin' us, we'll head you toward Bainter Valley an' turn you loose."

"Suppose I refuse to tell you where the mine can be found? You can't keep me here forever."

"Can't we? Well, perhaps not. But we can keep you here until you get mighty tired of the place. But I don't think that will be necessary; you are a sensible girl, and I have hopes that after awhile you'll give us a demonstration of your intelligence." He looked at her with a suave smile. "Meantime, while we are waiting for 'forever' to come, I can only hope that the boys will continue to be the gentlemen they have been so far."

She was silent at the threat.

"Look here," he said. "Let's make a deal. I don't want to be a hog. Tell me where the mine is, and I'll share it with you. I want to get out of this country, but I want to get out with a stake. I'll fix the rest of the boys up out-of my share, and you can walk off clean with yours. I'll make that deal with you; but you've got to do it quick."

She knew that he had no intention of keeping such a promise. His offer was merely a trick to get her to give him the information he desired.

So she laughed at him and had the satisfaction of watching his eyes cloud with disappointment.

"You won't, eh?" he said.

"You don't seem to believe what I tell you," she mocked. "I have told you that I do not know where the mine is located."

His gaze was level. "You're a liar," he said.

He stepped toward her and gripped both her shoulders with his huge hands. His fingers went deep into the flesh and he slowly moved her back

and forth as though meditating the violence his blazing eyes threatened.

In that instant she had a revelation of the man's character. Unopposed, he was governed by reason and swayed by impulses which made him, outwardly at least, seem a gentleman; once opposed, he was a primitive brute who gave himself entirely to passion.

HER best weapon would be a pretense of indecision. If he felt certain of ultimate victory, he might delay decisive action. And there might be a possible chance that Clay Meeder would stumble upon this valley. That, at least, was her only hope.

"Well," she said, looking him steadily in the eye, "I don't know exactly where the mine is, but I might be able to find it. But even if I did find it, how would I know that you would treat me fairly? You haven't so far, you know."

His grip on her shoulders relaxed. He grinned.

"You've got to trust me, I reckon," he said. He released her now and stepped back a pace. "You'll come around all right," he added.

"Well," she said hesitatingly, "I'll try to remember. But perhaps I can't. What then?"

His eyes glowed again.

"You'd better remember," he answered gruffly. "And look here," he added as he moved away from her, "keep out of sight as much as you can. You can't get away, no matter how much you roam around, but you are a fool if you go to posing in front of the boys."

Laura returned to the hut. She had supposed Lavercrombe to be the leader of the outlaws, and she had presumed that as such he would be in complete control. Yet from the man's manner she divined that he was slightly worried about her ultimate fate. And she knew why he was worried. He knew that if anything happened to her he would have to answer to Clay Meeder.

Therefore he would do his best to keep her from harm.

Yet she obeyed Lavercrombe in the matter of keeping herself at a distance from the other men. As a matter of fact, she did not again venture as far as the realm of rocks.

The first day passed without incident. Then another. When six had gone, she was ready to yield. To be sure, she had not been molested or mistreated in any way, and three times each day Lavercrombe appeared with food.

She did not know what was happening at the cache, but she could not fail to observe that certain lines in Lavercrombe's face were deepening. On the morning of the seventh day he told her that the men were growing impatient.

"Maybe I can hold them a day or two longer," he said, "and maybe not. If you're as smart as I think you are, you'll be ready to talk to-morrow."

Lavercrombe left her.

AFTER he had gone, she stood in the door of the hut and watched the sun throw its blending colors against the tall buttes on the eastern side of the valley. Later as she watched the magnificent pageant of the after-glow, and saw the purple shadows stealing toward the hills, she was oppressed with the futility of further resistance.

Summers was dead; Funstall and Meeder had not returned, or if they had returned they had not been able to find her. Somehow she knew that Lavercrombe had told her the truth about the gang. She knew most of them by sight and reputation. She felt that she did not dare to sleep, and so for many hours she sat on the chair in front of the door gazing at the stars that gleamed in the velvet blue sky above the edge of the butte across the valley.

For three or four nights the door of the hut had not been barred from

the outside. She accepted that neglect as proof that Lavercrombe had no fear of her attempting to escape. There was no moon to-night, and she knew there would be none until the early hours of morning.

She closed the door, barred it and prepared to get into the bunk. With a knee on its edge she paused, for a stealthy step, and a slithering, as of something brushing against the wall of the hut, reached her.

She gasped and then held her breath, suppressing the scream that threatened to come in spite of her determination to meet bravely whatever was to happen to her.

And then at the window appeared a face. She stood, paralyzed with fright until a sibilant, warning "S-s-h-h!" came through the bars.

Then the threatened scream became a sob of joy, and she swiftly and silently unbarred the door and threw it open.

Then she was clasping a misshapen figure to her and crying softly, "Jerry! Jerry!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOT PURSUIT.

LAURA and Jerry were together in the hut for perhaps five minutes, and then they emerged and slipped around the walls until they were at the rear, concealed in a heavy growth of brush.

Jerry's coolness and confidence amazed the girl. She had sought to leave the hut immediately, but Jerry had counseled delay until Laura could overcome her intense excitement.

"There's no hurry," he said. "They are all asleep. If we take our time and are careful, we will get away." Now in the darkness of the thicket he spoke again. "Don't talk any more until we get out of the valley." He took her hand and whispered to her to keep close to him.

Jerry's course did not take him to the rocky section through which Lavercrombe had brought Laura to the hut, but hugged the base of the granite wall. The brush did not grow so densely here, and there were narrow benches and ledges of rock along which they traveled with facility. Also, they were concealed by various huge rocks that dotted the moraine, and by the wild growth that fringed it.

Several times Jerry stopped and listened, and at such moments Laura strained her ears in an effort to detect any sound that would tell her they were discovered. But there was no disturbance.

By keeping close to the base of the wall they gradually increased their distance from the outlaw camp, for the wall swept away from the camp in a huge curve. Where their present course would lead them Laura did not know. But Jerry seemed to know exactly where he was going, for he went ahead confidently.

They crept along the base of the wall for about half an hour, and then Laura became aware that they had emerged upon some level ground. The darkness was intense, except for the star haze, and Laura could not penetrate it, but she felt a steady, slight breeze pressing against her, and she divined that they were in the gorge that connected the outlaws' valley with the one she had seen behind her when Lavercrombe had led her to the hut.

Jerry led her across the level, a distance of not more than a hundred yards, to the base of another rock wall.

And now he whispered to her: "We are out. But don't talk loud, for our voices might carry through the gorge. I've got two horses here. Two of Lavercrombe's men went away this morning. They got back after dark. They must have thought they'd be going away again shortly, for they left their saddles and bridles on. I've been waiting for five days for this chance."

"Five days! Why, Jerry! Do you mean to say that you have been near here all that time?"

"I was here the first day," said Jerry grimly. "You hadn't been gone riding ten minutes that morning when some of Lavercrombe's men tried to get in the cabin. I went up the passageway and blocked it. I hid behind the parapet wall and saw them riding away. I saw them meet some more men and go up the gorge. I saw them get you and ride away with you."

"I followed them, and was hiding in the brush at the top of the butte when Lavercrombe took you to the hut. I haven't done much since but hang around and watch for a chance to get you away."

"Jerry, what did you do for food and water?"

"I took some grub with me when I went up the passageway," he answered. "I don't eat much, you know, and it lasted until this morning. There's plenty of water in this gorge."

WHILE he had been talking he had been leading Laura along the base of the butte, and they now seemed to reach a recess in the wall. A horse neighed softly.

"Here they are," whispered Jerry.

They mounted and rode away at a walk, Jerry leading Laura's horse by the bridle rein.

They rode for half an hour, and it seemed to Laura that they were going through another valley, for it appeared that the darkness was lifting and that space was increasing around her.

Presently the moon rose. It was heralded by a mellow flood of light on the eastern skyline, changing darkness to an effulgent golden flood that bathed the world to the four horizons.

They were riding in a broad, ever-widening basin, and with their horses in swinging gallop they were heading for the point of a long high ridge that projected into the basin from the south.

Laura scanned the ridge closely and finally decided that it was not a ridge at all, but the sloping edge of a great timbered plateau.

When they entered the timber they were forced to ride singly, and Jerry took the lead. However, Laura kept close to him, and now she found opportunity to ask Jerry some questions.

"How many men were at the cache with Lavercrombe?" was the first.

"Eleven; all that's left of Lavercrombe's men."

"Is Luiz Loaza with them?"

"Yes."

"Where do you think those two men went—the two whose horses we took?"

"They didn't seem to go anywhere. I could see them almost all day, except for a little while when they were in this timber. It appeared to me that they were just looking around to see if anybody was looking for them. And maybe they found that somebody was looking for them, for they came back and ran straight to the cache to talk to Lavercrombe and the others, and they all seemed to be excited."

"There could be only one thing that would excite them, Jerry!" she said, her voice leaping.

"Sure," he said. "I thought that, too. Clay Meeder and his men are back. They are searching for us."

"Do you think Summers is dead, Jerry?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"Shucks, no. The Indians didn't get him. He's too smart."

She told Jerry about the diagram of the mine—how it had been in Lavercrombe's possession. For an instant Jerry's face paled. But his confidence in Summers was supreme.

"Well, maybe they had that," he said. "But Summers ain't dead."

THEY had been riding steadily, and now Jerry slowed his horse to a walk and looked back at his sister. She saw his gaze go past

her, saw his eyes widen, heard him gasp:

"They've missed you! They're coming!"

Laura turned in the saddle as her horse leaped forward after Jerry's. In the valley they had just left came a solitary rider. Little puffs of erupting dust followed him. He was hurtling over the sand like a projectile. Laura's glance did not last long, yet it seemed to her that when it had first rested upon him he was near the center of the basin. And now he was close to the slope of the mesa.

Jerry was now a hundred feet ahead of Laura. He was motioning violently and so she gave her horse the rein and tried her best to catch up. She did gain on Jerry, but it seemed the horse she was riding was not as fast as his.

Jerry continued to ride almost directly southward, except for the sudden deviations he was forced to make to avoid abrupt depressions and dead-falls. The moon had paled, but dawn was hovering on the eastern horizon, and a gray, bleak light disclosed the forest.

A mist, fleecy, and whiter than the daylight, was rising in stringy wisps from the moist leaf mold.

It was dangerous riding for Jerry, but he sent his horse plunging headlong into the mist. He went through it, and it swirled after him, sometimes infolding him, blotting him from view.

When they had traversed perhaps a mile of the forest Laura again glanced back. The pursuing rider was at that instant mounting the crest of the mesa.

It appeared that the trend of the land so far was upward, for Laura's backward glance had again disclosed the basin beyond the rider. At the first glance she had only seen one rider. Now there was another.

He was far out in the basin, but he was coming like a streak of light, and

he was heading directly toward the point where the first rider had ascended the mesa.

Laura did not look back again, for she did not want to see what she knew she would see if she kept on looking—the entire outlaw band racing across the basin in the tracks of the first two. She leaned forward and devoted herself to her riding.

Jerry had found a trail. It was narrow, but it flashed distinctly in her vision, and her horse was taking it with great, powerful leaps. He thundered down a long slope with dizzying velocity; and she caught a glimpse of Jerry's horse scurrying up a rise two or three hundred feet ahead of her.

For an hour both horses held the headlong pace. But Laura did not look back. Another hour passed, and she could feel that the animal under her was beginning to labor. But he ran on courageously.

Daylight had come now. The mist had lifted and the clear white light of the morning shimmered through the trees.

Now she was passing spots that were vaguely familiar to her; and suddenly the entire universe seemed to wheel around and settle into its proper place. Then she realized that she was near home.

Jerry was still two or three hundred feet ahead of her, heading his horse toward a point that she recognized as the place where the trail led downward into Bainter Valley.

She saw Jerry's horse vanish over the edge of the mesa and presently the animal under her reached it and started down.

Then she heard a shout behind her and a clatter of hoofs at the brink she had just left. She did not dare to turn. For her horse was tumbling and swaying as he descended; she could feel his muscles trembling and quivering, and she expected any instant to be thrown from the saddle.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



BAMBOO WAR

E. L. NALENCE joins our ARGOSY crew this week with his story, "Bamboo War." As we never had encountered the term "bamboo war" we questioned Mr. Nalence about it—at the same time inviting him to tell us a few words about himself. He writes:

My acquaintance with ARGOSY dates back to grammar school days, when it was bought out of my own pocket money and read secretly, either in the back yard or in my room with the door locked, due to the disapproval, sometimes physically expressed, of a parent whose tastes ran to the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Christian Herald*. And it is no small thrill to land a story of my own in the magazine that furnished me with many hours of enjoyment.

Your request for a definition of the term "bamboo war" is a little embarrassing. I got the expression from a newspaper correspondent who spent some three years in Nicaragua, and who filed most of the stories of the Marines' attempts to capture or blow up the wily and elusive Sandino. I have heard the term used before to describe any Central American or South American revolution, insurrection or other armed struggle—usually with a contemptuous inference.

However, neither my Nicaraguan expert nor another correspondent, who has spent quite a few years south of the Rio Grande, and who also knows the expression, can enlighten me as to its derivation or exact definition.

One explanation is that the term originated in a description of the country in which most rebels and insurrectos take cover—the brush, some of which is rather like bamboo. Another old-timer claims to have heard it in army circles, and that it came from China; probably dating back to the Boxer rebellion. In any case, all agree that the term connotes a matter of no great importance—a tempest in a teapot.

Now as to myself. I'm afraid there is nothing particularly striking or unusual in my uneventful career. When the United States decided to join in the Big Fracas in Europe I brought my preparatory studies for college to an abrupt close and enlisted in July, 1917, a few days after my eighteenth birthday.

And, quite frankly, it was a perfectly gorgeous poster outside the old Shanley Building at Broadway and Forty-Fourth Street that

led me to offer my services to Uncle Sam. I have never forgotten that poster. It showed a signal corps man in full dress uniform standing atop a caisson scanning a distant battlefield through binoculars. Shells were bursting about him, but his was the most delightful *sang-froid* imaginable, equalled only by his partner's, who crouched on the ground beside the caisson, sending messages over a field telegraph. Both were supremely indifferent to the sudden death in the air, and both looked as though they were having a glorious time.

The subsequent disappointment and shock to my illusions when I discovered that such goings-on occurred only in posters, and that army life as endured in the signal corps consisted mainly in tedious, interminable wiring details and other inglorious toil, tinctured with gloom my entire two years of soldiering. I have never forgiven the artist who palmed off that poster on an unsuspecting and gullible youth.

With my outfit, which was attached to the Seventy-Eighth Division, I spent several months with the British in the back areas of Aire and Calais; and then saw some action in the St. Mihiel drive and the Argonne offensive, until the armistice brought peace and the delousing machines.

The war completed my formal education and almost finished me, too. From the "take-no-thought-of-the-morrow" life I came back to the everyday world of dollars and cents and found readjustment slow and tortuous. I drifted from one dull, uninteresting job to another until I landed on a morning newspaper and found some measure of contentment.

Here I met the war correspondent who had been with Abd-El Krim in the Riff and with the Marines in Nicaragua, and others, who sit around in the early morning hours after the last edition has gone in and the night editor has growled his diurnal "good night!" spinning yarns they have gathered from all sorts of places, stories that were not sent over the cables to the paper because they were not "spot news."

I have always wanted to write, and listening to these tales of far-off places gave me the needed inspiration, if it may be called that. So, somewhat uncertainly, I tried and was pleasantly surprised to find that they did sell. That's about all there is to my side of the story.

Perhaps some of our world wanderers may be able to throw a bit more light on the derivation of "bamboo war"?

TALBOT MUNDY'S "Ho for London Town!" struck a particularly responsive chord in our younger readers:

Seymour, Ind.

"Ho for London Town!" is a *real* story. I am a junior in high school, and we are studying Shakespeare and his works, so this novel has an interest for me.

W. HAUGE.

Cape Elizabeth, Maine.

I am fourteen years of age and a freshman in high school. I take medieval history and I discover that some names and phrases in your stories coincide with those of history, such as those in "The Sword of Vengeance" and "Ho for London Town!". This makes it all the more interesting.

The story that disclosed to me the real value of ARGOSY was "Slaves of the Wire," by Garret Smith. I believe him to be one of your foremost authors. "You've Killed Privacy" and "Thirty Years Late" and "The Girl in the Moon" were swell. I eagerly await another by him. I especially like the history, scientific and "impossible" stories.

You have a great staff of authors. Writers such as Smith, LaMaster, MacIsaac, Talbot Mundy, Cummings, Seltzer, Footner, Mason, Wilstach, Worts, Wirt, Dunn, McMorrow, Adams, and Cunningham are a great asset to a magazine.

"The Phantom in the Rainbow," "The Raider," "War Lord of Many Swordsmen," "The Black Ace," "He Rules Who Can," "Ho for London Town!" and many others too numerous to name were simply great. The short stories are great, too, although they incite little comment.

Argonotes is as interesting as a story. It's the first thing I look at. I only wish you printed more. Please do not discontinue the department.

HARRY E. PROUT.

A SPORTS serial, this reader suggests. Good enough! Fred MacIsaac has just finished a dandy, and it will be running in our summer issues.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

That I have been reading the ARGOSY for only three and one-half years must be set to my youthful age. There are many readers who have started before me, but I have the advantage in knowing that I will read more of the magazines to come.

I have in my collection consecutive magazines for a year and one-half. I keep a list of all stories under three headings—novels, novelettes and short stories. I rate excellent stories two checks; very good, one check, and all others receive none.

Impossible stories are my prime favorites. Such authors as LaMaster, MacIsaac, Worts, Merritt, Burroughs, and Cummings, always register a big, swinging kick with me. Some late novels that have received two checks are: "World Brigands," "The Crime Circus,"

"A Brand New World," "The Raider," "The Girl in the Moon," "War Lord of Many Swordsmen," and last, but best of all, comes "The Phantom in the Rainbow." "Buccaneers of the Air" also gets two checks.

In closing, may I suggest a sport story serial?

WILLIAM ROSENBERG.

HERE is a batch of favorite authors:

Brockton, Mass.

You ask for the readers' viewpoint on the stories in the ARGOSY. I have been reading them for the last seven or eight years. I enjoy them very much. My favorite writers are: W. Wirt, William Corcoran, Charles Alden Seltzer, Garret Smith, Charles Divine, Fred MacIsaac, Hulbert Footner. I enjoy stories by Lieutenant John Hopper, as I'm very interested in army stories. A short time ago there was much discussion of Western stories. I think an excellent Western story is better than a dozen about things that never happened.

I am glad so many readers like Fred MacIsaac's stories, as I think they are wonderful. Also please do not discontinue Argonotes, as I think it is a very good idea and helps the editor a lot.

In other words, there are very few stories that I don't read in the ARGOSY, as they very seldom have one that I do not care for. My dad has taken this magazine as long as I can remember and that is ten or eleven years, as I'm twenty now.

JOSEPHINE SMITH.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....



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A Two-Part Story

by J. ALLAN DUNN

*Don't fail to begin it in the next issue
MAY 25th*

BLUE BLOOD AND RED

A Complete Novelette

by JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

takes us to romantic and temperamental Sicily. A romance tingling with excitement and nicely flavored with delicious humor.

AGENTS OF PROGRESS

by ROBERT J. PEARSALL

is a feature short story that you will remember—a tale of two old desert rats and the inexorable onward march of civilization.

A WESTERN NOVEL

by FRED MacISAAC

in the issue of JUNE 1st

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"First In Fiction"

Out Every Wednesday

"The Man Who Couldn't Remember"

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

From Callahan's night club they carried him out—the man who had learned too much. Once he was Bob Trent, heir to a million, handsome, vigorous, two-fisted. Now he was a human wreck, a man without a mind. Callahan, criminal boss, had a way of closing mouths. Murder was the usual method.

But in Bob Trent's case there was too much peril in that method. Callahan, with diabolic cunning, took another way out. When Trent woke up, his head ached with a frightful throb, and, horrified, he realized that his mind was slipping, slipping. But Callahan had not reckoned with the wit of a night club queen, nor the courage of a dogged sleuth, and Bob Trent one day groped his way back to sanity, and then—guns blazed in Callahan's gilded underworld joint!



"MACY'S WINDOW"

By Robert H. Rohde

The Red Duke commits a robbery where robbery can't be committed.

"THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE"

By Thomas Mack

The guilt of a baffling murder hangs by a thread.

"JUST ONE LITTLE THING"

By William A. Ucker

A story of the come-back of an old-time cop who uses his head when his feet get tired.

"A SNITCH IN TIME"

By Thomas Topham

The gumdrop con' makes a break for freedom to settle a score with his wife.

Also stories by Madeleine Sharps Buchanan, John Goodwin, and others.

In the May 18th Issue of

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